

Hope of the Maya

Maxaqtacca, #1

by Shane Hetrick,

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Chapter I

An Unexpected Bounty.

Lejo’s blue eyes pierced the terra firma in the distance, searching for a sign of Hesan’s return. It was now late afternoon, maybe two or three hours before the sun would set, and the village was starting preparations for the evening meal, which would start with or without his older brother. He looked again. Still, nothing was visible for miles...just sand, dirt, and cacti. And then, beyond what was immediately visible, desert began shyly merging with jungle until the heavily forested Sierra Madre Mountains filled the horizon. Hesan was definitely going to be late getting home. He climbed back down the ladder that led to the top of the palisade.

Waiting for him at the bottom was his mother, Sinaj.

“Have you seen Hesan?” she asked casually. She was not really worried, because Hesan’s hunting trips customarily lasted much longer than he was even aware. Sinaj absentmindedly smoothed her mousy brown hair, seeming to be well at ease. However, Lejo knew that if she got angry, a stern streak of fire would invariably flare up.

“Why, of course I’ve seen Hesan. He’s my own brother!” he replied, knowing that his mother could be easily amused—or annoyed, whichever happened first—by his quaint teasing.

With condescending toleration, Sinaj asked him again more specifically, “Do you have any idea where he is at this moment?”

“Nope,” Lejo replied, with faked cheer. Then he sighed. This meant no fresh game for dinner. “I wonder what’s taking him so long. Maybe he’s busy chasing some deer. He probably found something at the very end of the route.”

“Yeah, right.”

Mother and son sighed, both knowing the truth.

Hesan would be late again.

A head popped into view from behind a hut. Estevan, who was also concerned about his son's tardiness, asked Lejo and his wife, "Seen any sign of Hesan yet?"

"You can look for yourself, if you'd like. I didn't see anyone."

Estevan availed himself of the ladder and climbed most of the way up to the palisade, but before he stepped on top of the wall, he called out, "Here he is! He's coming, but he's got a...a horse, and there's something—no wait, someone on the horse!"

"What?!" Sinaj exclaimed.

"Can I see?" Lejo asked at the same time.

"No, Lejo, you need to get back to your lessons."

"Aww, father, do I have to?"

"Yes. You're not even supposed to be looking for Hesan right now. You're supposed to be learning to sew!"

"Well, could I borrow your hat?"

"It's an important skill to learn, and—what? My chief's headdress for special occasions? Why on earth would you want that?" Estevan stopped himself. "On second thought, I don't want to know. Just don't get it dirty or anything."

Estevan exchanged a brief, amused glance with his wife after climbing down from the wall. "My dearest, would you please look after Lejo for a moment? I need to finish up some business before greeting Hesan and his lucky catch. It sure didn't take him very long to find it today."

Sinaj took one last look towards the gate, thinking, *Yes...not very long at all. He couldn't have been gone for more than a couple of hours.*

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Hesan felt like dying. His lungs burned with every breath. The sun had sunk beneath the horizon over an hour ago, and he had been running since lunchtime. He was still trying to find some game for the evening meal, but there were just no animals to see—unless one noticed a strange apparition in the jungle dirt beside him.

It was a cleverly camouflaged nightmare. Loping alongside Hesan was a jaguar longer than he was tall—and at six feet and two inches, he was tall for a Mayan. Hesan had taken Valeria from her mother's den six years ago and raised her from a cub. He, then twelve years old, had barely escaped with his life, and had the scars on his back to prove it.

Valeria was almost seven years of age now, and her glossy golden pelt would gleam brightly along with her razor-sharp fangs, if it were not for the darkening of the sky. She had blotchy, dark spots that completed the disguise. To the untrained eye, there really were no animals to be seen.

Hesan Malechi, son of Estevan, stopped at last and brushed long, brown strands of hair with subtle, auburn highlights away from his forehead. Staring out past the sandy trail into the shadowy underbrush that made up the outskirts of the Yucatán rainforest, his hazel eyes closed in exasperation. Returning to his village empty-handed was not an option.

He was lanky, lean, and mean, and both he and Valeria were excellent runners—unlike Hesan’s other companion.

Haeldar was a tough character, with three pointy ends, and could not really do a whole lot of running. Haeldar was Hesan’s pride and joy, and worthily so. After several years of searching, bartering, and fitting, the custom-built halberd suited the Mayan young man’s needs perfectly.

A six-foot-long ash pole was Haeldar’s body. Hesan had found it as a piece of driftwood, and it was dark and harder than any other wood he had ever known. The steel head, given enough force, could pierce armor of any kind.

Hesan had bought it from a Spanish soldier-turned-missionary for almost all of his life savings. The butt end was a small but double-bladed axe fashioned from obsidian. This metal, native to the region of Central America, lacked the ability to penetrate like steel, but held a finely honed edge for a long amount of time without dulling. The whole package was as versatile as its maker.

Haeldar was useful as a walking staff, throwing spear, and even as defense from other men. Hesan had taught himself how to wield it.

It was also useful as a hunting tool, but today had been a poor day for hunting. There were no deer, no rabbits, nor even hawks circling overhead. Just as the two were about to give up and head back to the village, Valeria’s ears perked up and she twitched her nose.

Anticipating some quarry, the hunter brandished Haeldar. Valeria crept forward. Quick as a blur, a small hare sprang out of its hiding place behind a bush at the edge of the game trail. Dust spurted everywhere as Hesan and Valeria took off in hot pursuit. Zigzagging in evasive action, the prey dodged while the predator doggedly pursued.

Hesan was too busy to notice the approaching hoof beats. The hare wasn’t too busy. It suddenly stopped stock-still in terror, surrounded on all sides. Valeria sensed that something was amiss and dashed out of sight. Hesan still failed to see the oncoming horsemen in the trees close by and expertly leaned back, aimed, whipped his body into the motion of throwing, and in the instant that he released the projectile spear, he saw them—too late to react.

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Capitán Pedro José Eduardo San Xavier was known as *tu Madre* to the others. His little contingent of mounted soldiers sullenly goaded their horses on ahead of him, their flags lagging in the unmoving air of the strangely silent rainforest. In the distant underbrush just outside the edge of the trees, a faint crashing sound was heard, and Pedro frowned further. Though it was almost a useless gesture, he lifted his spyglass to his left eye, the one without an eye patch, and gradually recognized the shape of a young man running toward him.

He ordered his squad forward to greet this strange figure. He then saw the darting victim the boy was pursuing. He removed the scope from his eye, revealing an incredulous expression—something hard to achieve with only one visible eyebrow.

The kid, not noticing his horsemen, dashed up, almost to their very hoofs. The prey, a little rabbit, did notice. It stopped on a dime, offering an easy target for the hunter, who threw his weapon. The missile struck true, and both rabbit and

weapon landed with a thump just as the group of horsemen emerged from the rainforest. Now Pedro had his attention.

Pedro addressed him, regally twirling the tip of his thick mustache. “*Hola!* How is your day?” He hoped that the savage would be able to understand Spanish. After all, the Spaniards had spread their language throughout the Aztec lands, and what difference could there be between the barbarian tribes?

There was no answer.

Pedro tried again, “Do you like my hat?” He took off his headgear, a black *conquistador’s* helmet with a large white and red feather to the side.

He offered it to the silent Mayan, who refused it without a word.

“By the gods, man! Don’t you talk?!” Pedro yelled, frustrated.

“I am capable of speech,” the quiet hunter replied in a low voice. “I am called Hesan, son of Estevan. What is your name?” Hesan stood straight up and tall, even though Pedro, on his horse, towered over him.

Slightly disconcerted by the young man’s audacity, Pedro forced his tongue into action. “Well,” he chuckled with a trace of nervousness, “you can respectfully call me by the name Sir Pedro.” He placed his helmet back on his head and pointed his decorative saber at him. Pleased with himself, Pedro continued. “And if you have so much cheek as to challenge me, I suggest that you—back—off!” These last few words were punctuated by a few hearty gestures with the tip of the saber.

Hesan seemed irritated. Still speaking softly, he asked, “What do you find so ‘cheeky’ about me, Sir Pedro?”

Hesan made a garbled, whistling sound with his tongue and made a quick hand motion.

With a throaty snarl, a furry blur catapulted through the air.

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The Great Mayan Temple of Aelyon loomed through the morning mists. The spell of the wee hours of the morning just before the sun rises still lingered in the faint starlight. Its towering pagodas stepped up from the ground in huge, stony bounds. Steep, gray steps led from the grass all the way to the very apex of the pyramid. The other side of the temple melded into the flank of the nearest mountain.

Reaching into the expanse of the sky, the surrounding peaks of the Sierra Madre Mountains were of a height that could not be seen without a gasp of wonder. Flashing snow wrapped the summits in a white blanket. This day, foggy clouds graced the feet of the mountains and gave the impression of an ancient man in a shadowy robe with an impossibly long beard that pooled at his sandals.

Birdsong chorused through the air, filling it with sweet, soothing music. Monks in dignified gray cloaks prayed peacefully. In the ceremonial gazebo on top of the temple, a small man wearing strikingly bright robes from his hair to his feet gazed appraisingly at the view from its overlooking heights. His own quiet majesty held no competition with the glory of the creation set before his vision. The whole scene had a soft, hazy sort of black and white look to it, even though its gates and tapestries were colorfully embroidered, like in a strange but wonderful dream.

Approaching from behind, a dark figure stealthily padded toward King Mehosha. The king turned around, only to see out of the corner of his eye a giant springing

toward him from the shadows. The surprised ruler was overwhelmed in a bear hug by a colossus of a man nearly twice his size.

Yelling for help, the high king was released, and suddenly he began hugging and laughing and crying at the same time. The room echoed with the big man's hoarse chuckles until both finally gained control of themselves.

The titan, Woab, had tears running from his eyes, and King Mehosha joyously asked him, "Where have you been, my brother? I thought you were, were..."

"Dead?" finished Woab. "If I am dead, how am I standing here before you today, my king?" Mehosha only shook his head in wonder. "I was captured by Aztecs, your highness, but finally I have returned—with tidings of great sorrow. My apologies, King Mehosha."

"No, my loyal brother, it is I who had failed in searching for you, and I am sorrier." The kind king paused and then smote himself on the forehead. "What a fool I am!" he cried. "Here we are, sitting around a cold, upper floor, when you have, no doubt, fatigue and hunger beyond my imagining. Come with me, brother, and join me for the best breakfast of our lives."

The two siblings descended the stone staircase to a lower floor, and then walked along a corridor into a grand dining hall. It was warmly lit by fires all around the room.

Torches gave off a soft glow that thawed the soul, and windows let the gorgeous morning sunlight trickle inside. A soft cushion adorned each chair, and two of these at the side of the hugely extensive oak table seated the companions. At the ring of a mellow bell, a woman gracefully entered the room, dressed rather elaborately for a servant. "How may I serve you and Woab, your majesty?" she asked serenely.

"She's my wife, if you didn't remember," the king whispered with a jab to Woab's ribs with his elbow.

Louder, he answered, "Mella, I would like a meal fit for a king!" He slapped his knee and guffawed, "It's a joke! Do you get it? I am a king! Oh, never mind. Breakfast for two—no, better yet, for three! Woab must be hungrier than two men. But hurry before our guest grows faint with starving exhaustion." A gracious grin lightly springing to her royal lips, Queen Mella exited the room.

Only a few minutes later, the queen returned with several more waiters and waitresses. They were laden with platters of all kinds of cooked eggs, grilled meats, and boiled potatoes. Mehosha heartily dug in while Woab consumed immense mouthfuls of breakfast with a will.

The two finally slowed their eating spree, both having packed away an amazing amount of food, and washed it down with several mugs of steaming cacao juice and llama milk.

The king spoke after wiping his royal face with a silk napkin. "Well, Woab, now that your belly and soul are filled, would you mind filling my head with knowledge of your trip?"

His brother gained a somber face and explained what had happened to him. "My king, I fear that it is only a disparaging tale. But at your request, I will relate it." The king sat back in his chair but soon leaned forward in earnest.

Woab was the general of the Mayan army, which had for centuries held the Aztec forces at bay whenever peace was shattered. He had heard tell of the tiny

group of people arriving from many months away across the oceans in their huge floating castles, bringing their god Quetzalcoatl back after thousands of years, fulfilling the Aztec prophecy of legend. Woab wanted to investigate this fantastic tale, and so he went undercover with a few accomplices.

His mission was compromised, and Woab was captured by Aztecs and brought to Tenochtitlan, their major city. While he was there, the city was overrun—first by a riot and then by the Spanish soldiers—allowing him to escape from the Aztec prisons and penetrate the Spanish camp. There, he overheard the Spanish generals planning to continue their killing spree after Tenochtitlan on to the Mayans. Finally, he got away and returned to tell Mehosha the terrible news.

Woab lamented, “King Mehosha, my heart grieves to bear this information, for I have no idea how to deter the Spanish. The weapons and tactics they used were no match for the mighty Aztecs, and I don’t know how we can outfight them.”

The king thought for several long moments. “I had previously decided,” Mehosha announced, “that the Maya would forge an alliance with the Spanish if at all possible.

But in light of this situation, I sincerely doubt that it would last very long, if it worked at all.”

Woab nodded. “That’s what the Aztecs found out the hard way. Cortez promised Montezuma, the Aztecan ruler, peace if he would tribute them gold, but instead he tried to rule the Aztecs through him. Then he went on a journey, and by the time he returned, the civilians had killed Montezuma and a new leader named Cuauhtémoc had risen in his place. After a bloody siege of their capital city, Cortez killed him in the Aztecs’ own temple!”

Chapter II

In the Village.

Today was a glorious day for Spain. The Aztecs had fallen to the Crown, every last one. All would be converted or killed. Hernán Cortez certainly did not want to disappoint his king or his queen. He had murdered Cuauhtémoc himself on top of his own altar for all of Tenochtitlan to see. Great was Cortez’s name in the land.

Fame, glory, and honor were his.

But none of the above was enough to satisfy Cortez’s lust for riches. He scoffed at beautiful cloth and prized artifacts. The only thing in the world he wanted was...gold.

Aztecan gold. Mayan gold. Incan gold. Any gold. Gold was his love, his power, his weakness. He surrounded himself with the precious metal. His swirling cape of command was woven from gold. His mighty helmet: hammered from the precious metal. His gilded sword hilt matched the heavy jewelry draping from him. He even carried a handful of gold nuggets to finger.

Not content with the piles of wealth surrounding him, Cortez went on with his greedy plans to hoard more. The Aztecs no longer had any. The Incas were being

worked on back to the west of the Andes Mountains. The only possessors left on the continent were the Mayans. Cortez led his armies north at that very moment. Soon, they too, would fall. Then, all the gold would belong to him.

Cortez whirled toward his attendant. “Roberto, you worm, what news is there from the front lines?”

Startled, the servant nevertheless answered, “I believe we should arrive at the first Mayan village tomorrow, and a scouting party rides there as we speak, your lordship.”

His master furrowed his eyebrows and then raged at the cowering man. “It takes too long!” he bellowed. “I want that village taken today. Or you will be flogged to death!”

This brought a whimpering cry from the sniveling creature at his feet. “M-m-my lord, my m-master, i-i-it will be done! B-but please, show your servant mercy. I will see to it that you get your gold as soon as h-h-humanly possible.”

Those last few words were the attendant’s mistake.

Cortez roared at the groveling unfortunate, “You dare forget that I am a god? I, the great Quetzalcoatl, have the power to send your soul to eternal suffering in the abyss.

Say that I will have my gold as fast as almightily possible.

Say it!” The look on the conqueror’s face was horrifying to behold. Stammering, Roberto managed to squeak out the requested line.

At this, the commander seemed finished. “Good, my cowardly pet, for I grow impatient with your progress.”

Life was unfair for poor Roberto. Cortez seemed to blame anything and everything on his counselor—the eighth holder of that dreaded position.

Cortez calmed down and changed his temper. “Now, Roberto, how long have you had this job as my assistant?”

Afraid to answer for fear of his master, the shivering man was silent. “Come, come, you are doing well!” Cortez’s voice was oily smooth—too smooth.

Momentarily encouraged, Roberto piped up: “My lord, t-t-today is my second day, if it p-p-pleases you.”

With surprising agility for his bulk, Cortez grabbed the counselor’s neck, lifted him to his tiptoes, and hurled him out the window. The commander’s tent was a three-story high hodge-podge of ropes and cloth, and the poor servant’s scream accompanied him all the way to the ground.

Cortez called after him, “Yes, it pleases me, scum, it pleases me!” He laughed mirthlessly and evilly as the attendant hit the dirt far below with a sickening thud.

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Pain wracked Pedro’s bones and pounded his head. It felt like a horse wearing full battle armor had bucked him off its back, trampled over him, and then fell on top of him. He did not want to open his eyes, afraid of what he might see. So instead, he tried to remember what had gone wrong. First, he thought about the tall, young warrior.

Then he recalled how sure he was that he had controlled the entire situation. Finally, it hit him.

Those cold, green and brown eyes, the snarling growl, the flying blur. Pedro peeled back his eyelids. The sun was so bright that his eyes watered. He shut them again immediately and groaned. The blinding, searing heat hit him like a cannonball, made worse by the muggy humidity.

He noticed that his hands and feet were bound. Then he heard a short growl, and recognized it as the sound he had heard as he fell unconscious.

An agonizingly familiar voice announced, "Ah, the brave knight awakens! I thought you would lie like that for days. You're a strong man, Sir Pedro." It was the young man with the big cat creature. Pedro could not help but blink a few times and look at him. He saw a courteous, knowing smile before he closed his eyes again.

"You may fall back asleep if you wish. Sorry about my jaguar Valeria. She sure packs a hard wallop." Pedro heard a loud purring ensue.

Hesan—that was the warrior's name, he remembered—continued to talk to him. "I tied you up so that you wouldn't fall off your horse. You have a fine animal, I might add. We are heading back to my village. My father, who is the tribal leader there, will decide your fate."

He laid his head back on the saddle of the horse, and his eyes closed. When he came to, Hesan was leading the horse through a small, dirt-paved village square. There were many rows of wooden benches arranged in a semicircle facing a stone pedestal. On it was a boy in a headdress. He stood proudly, with his chest puffed out like a peacock, and he was eyeing Pedro with a menacing expression.

"I am Lejo, son of Estevan, the acting officer, the commander-in-chief, the head man, the top of the world, and all that. The point is, I'm in charge here, and I'll be the one who has a say in the matter—the matter of your place in my village, that is." Lejo had his chin in the sky and busied himself trying to make Pedro feel small.

How could this kid be the father of the young man beside me, much less the chief of the village? Pedro thought. All the talking he could manage was, "What?"

At his remark, Lejo looked insulted. He answered Pedro with a tone of disbelief. "How dare you oppose my authority? Just for that, I have now decided that you will be held for ransom. You will be kept hostage until I get everything I want!"

Then Pedro asked if this ransom would be gold.

Lejo stared at Pedro as if he had asked the stupidest possible question in the world. "Gold? Good gracious, you're dumb. What do you think will be the ransom?"

Olives! Of course—Spanish olives. What else could anybody want? I'm telling you, I want olives. More olives than you could imagine, olives piled up as far as the eye can see! Mounds of them—mountains of them! Olives, stretching across the whole world, forever, into eternity!"

By now, the boy was ranting, raving, and hopping up and down.

A tan, muscular hand gently but firmly grasped Lejo's elbow, and he immediately calmed down. A deep, loving voice made the boy hang his head. "My favorite, youngest son, I know you don't like learning from your mother how to quilt. But that does not mean you can run wild, getting my hat dirty."

The broad man reached down, plucked the feathered headgear off his son's forehead, and put it onto his own.

His teeth flashed as he grinned at Pedro. His eyes were a fathomless brown, filled with great care and wisdom. “I would shake your hand, sir, but your condition cautions me against it. My son is not the chief quite yet, and Estevan is my name. Here, in the Kirtech clan, you will be treated to a swift recovery. Hesan is my eldest son, and it is my understanding that he captured you, the leader of a Spanish scouting troop.”

Pedro could only nod. This Mayan culture was so new to him that he was overcome with a sense of awe, respect, and gratitude. His voice finally found itself. “My name is Pedro Jos—that is, Pedro, and you have my utmost thanks.

If it would please you, I would enjoy a nice rest before I shake your hand.”

Estevan’s eyes twinkled, and he nodded to Hesan.

Pedro’s last moment of consciousness ended a few minutes later, with his head on a soft pillow and his aching body in a warm, clean bed.

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“After that, I don’t remember much of anything except sleep. But by the gods, I would like to know what happened to me in the desert!” Pedro was finished speaking. Looking around at the village folk surrounding him, he added, “Go ahead, young Hesan.”

Hesan took a sudden breath as he looked up at the sea of faces staring back at him. The whole village had gathered for this occasion, and several hundred pairs of eyes were focused entirely on him. Dressed informally for the most part, the crowd probably reckoned that they would hear the brief story of the chief’s son and then resume their normal, everyday lives. But what Hesan knew for certain, due to some innate sense that he could not place, was that their normal, everyday lives would be unattainable after he finished telling his story.

He had been trying to figure out what had happened to him this afternoon. The sun had set, and night had been coming. He had seen the rabbit and the Spaniards, he was on his way back, and then.

Then it had been light again. Had been afternoon again. How could it be possible? It was as if time had rolled back on itself, and he could not understand it at all.

But at the moment, he did not have the luxury of trying to fathom this mystery. Hesan breathed in deeply once more and obliged Pedro.

“I will complete the story from that point, where you blacked out, and I will explain—”

“You mean you knocked him out?” Lejo interjected excitedly. His parents shushed him, as did everyone else in the square.

Hesan continued, “No, no, Lejo. Just listen and don’t interrupt!” He was about to go on when a voice spoke at top speed before Hesan could utter another word.

“But if you didn’t knock him out then who did and if you didn’t then did he really blackout because if he didn’t blackout and he said he blacked out then how do we know if Sir Pedro is really telling the truth because if he’s not telling the truth then—” It was Lejo again. He would have gone on, and probably would have blacked himself out from lack of oxygen, if Hesan had not have walked over to his brother and clamped a hand over the motoring mouth.

“Would you please shut up?!” everybody yelled at once.

Lejo hardly looked daunted, but with Hesan's hand on his mouth, all he could manage was a faint, muffled "okay."

Hesan slowly released his white knuckled grip, and when Lejo's lips stayed shut, he stood and walked back to the center of the eager crowd. "Anyway, before I was so rudely interrupted"—here he shot a glare at his little brother—"I will finish the account.

"As Sir Pedro already said, 'a furry blur catapulted through the air.' That blur, as you may have guessed, was none other than my own buddy Valeria. I did not knock Sir Pedro out cold. It was Val, just as I had trained her to do when I made that signal.

"Valeria flew through the air and tackled the captain out of his saddle to the ground. I picked up Haeldar and brandished it at the other Spaniards. However, they were not interested in me at all. Val had frightened them out of their wits. She growled once and started towards the closest one, and that was all it took. They all galloped away screaming for their foolish gods to save them out of the hands of this terrible monster." Hesan scratched behind Valeria's itchy ears fondly and then carried on.

"This left me with Haeldar in my hands, Valeria scaring the remaining horse into a statue, a rabbit for dinner, and an unconscious Spanish captain on the ground before me. So, I picked up Sir Pedro and carried him over to his horse," Hesan gestured over to the stalls, at the newly stabled chestnut bay, "and strapped him onto it. I motioned for Valeria to herd the horse after me, and we struck out for home. I then regarded a large cloud of dust, which I realized was the Spanish army, and doubled my pace.

"I finally got home and then, as you all know, brought my captive to the village square, and tied him to the tree behind me where he is now. I calmed down the horse and took care of it, I cooked the hare, and now you all ate it.

All else you know, and thank you for hearing my story."

The audience clapped and applauded politely, and at this Hesan bowed self-consciously.

The chief stood proudly to speak. "Friends, you have now seen evidence that my son is just as brave as any."

Lejo grinned broadly and did a little jig. "Not you, Lejo, your older brother!" Everybody laughed, including the clowning Mayan boy.

He gave a mock grimace and added, "Hesan, wipe that smug smile off your face and don't let this go to your head!" The chief embraced his son, and with a surprising display of strength for his age, flipped Hesan over his shoulder and back on his feet again.

The village cheered good-naturedly. Estevan announced, "We're done with the ceremony, so you're dismissed." The young ones, cooped up from sitting still for so long, let out a whoop of joy and scampered away to recommence their games.

The chief and his two sons, along with a few elders, went over to the tree to see the captive. Men can be bitter, but Pedro José Eduardo San Xavier had taken all of his bad luck quite well and even appeared to be enjoying his time in the Kirtech village. "Thank you for offering me your food and drink, although I must say your hospitality could be better..." he said with a wink, wiggling in his bonds, "...I can't quite reach my beard." They all smiled.

Hesan looked at his dad, who nodded. "We have decided that you have two options. You can stay here as a cruelly treated slave and be whipped every hour, on the hour. Or, you can be escorted to our capital city of Murixcanaoy, as a prisoner of war, to have an audience with King Mehosha to discuss what knowledge you have that could help us."

Pedro glanced at Estevan before replying to Hesan,

"What kind of choice is that? Let's go to M-you-rick-sca-whatever!"

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King Mehosha was flustered. Woab knew that it took a big problem for his brother to be flustered. "As Aelyon Most High has said, if Hernán Cortez cannot be with us," the king stated sadly, "then he must be against us. This disturbs me greatly, because our chances are pretty slim against the Spanish."

Woab nodded solemnly. "I know that though we may have better numbers, Cortez brings with him many weapons that are more powerful than what ten men could do. My king, I have no idea what we should do in this matter."

"Ah, but that is why I am king, and you are not. I know who we have on our side, who can triumph over the Spanish army without letting a drop of our blood fall."

Struck with wonder, Woab could only manage one word: "Who?"

King Mehosha shrugged and seemed to be joking.

Then he asked simply, "Don't you remember who made the universe and keeps it suspended in perfect motion?"

And who supplied the earth with life, our land with food, water, and shelter, and, best of all, who loves us as his most prized creations despite our terrible faults?"

Woab only shook his head wordlessly.

Mehosha supplied his own answer. "Aelyon, the Most High God, who forgives us and cares for us, will beyond any shadow of the valley of doubt deliver us from the hands of those who would hurt us," King Mehosha proclaimed in joyous admiration. "One must only trust in him, whose mighty power extends beyond creation, outside of time and space, and he who does will be saved."

Woab, lost in thought, spoke after several long moments. "That may be. However, your highness should not forget that our God trusts us to do our part, as he will do his."

"Thank you for reminding me. Sometimes I forget that though we may be powerless, with God's help we can accomplish much more than we would be able to do on our own," the king agreed. "Now, about what we can do. I have heard tell that the Kirtech tribe has captured the captain of a Spanish scouting party."

Woab gained interest. "Now there is a stroke of luck!"

This could allow us some chance of creating our own Spanish contraptions. I wonder how much the Spanish teach their scouts about making gunpowder weapons."

King Mehosha did not share his brother's interests in the ways of warfare. He suggested, "I had in mind more along the lines of where the bulk of the army is and how heavily guarded Cortez is."

The king sent for a messenger. Within minutes, an expert horseman named Knojes stood before them.

Mehosha questioned him with genuine concern. "How is your family, sir? Are your children healthy and your wife happy?"

"Yes, your majesty," Knojes affirmed.

"Good, for I shall have need of someone to bring word to Estevan of the Kirtech village. Go to him and bring his prisoner back to the palace with as much speed as you can muster. Thank you for serving your king. Go now, and Godspeed."

Knojes bowed curtly and left.

Mehosha turned to his brother. "I am very sorry to request this of you, but before you return home, I have much more to discuss with you tonight."

Chapter III

On Full Stomachs.

"Good morning, Mister Pedro! You must eat to regain your strength for the long day ahead."

Nustije sang with excitement and seemed happy to be awake in the new day. Perhaps she and Oranos, Hesan's younger sisters, were the only ones who were indeed cheerful. The previous night's feast and ceremony had gone late, and many village folk were still abed.

She was two years older than her ten-year-old sister.

They both danced across the dirt yard with colorful wild flowers in their hair. The Spanish captain got off his comfortable cot and splashed water on his whiskery face from a shallow basin to fully rouse himself from sleep.

"Where is breakfast held?" Pedro asked softly, careful not to disturb sleeping villagers.

The cheery girls did not reply, but skipped merrily out of the guest hut. Pedro had no choice but to follow after them with his growling stomach in tow. From the left, Hesan and Lejo waved at the Spaniard and dashed over to him. Hesan told him, "Sir Pedro, your morning meal awaits you! And, might I add, my father has prepared a veritable feast in your honor."

The children led the hungry man across the village square. The pink and orange glow of the sunrise contrasted with the previous evening's torchlight. They walked up to the chief's house, and Hesan opened the door for the early morning party of newly-made friends.

Greeting Pedro inside the door was Estevan himself.

"Welcome to our wonderful home," the chief said. "We have breakfast waiting on the table for you to accompany you on the road." Little did Estevan know how prophetic his words really were.

Pedro replied, "My gratitude lies with you and your son, and to your kind clan, for your hospitality. My time here has been refreshing, and to tell you the truth, I

never actually liked being in the Spanish army.” The captain bowed thankfully. “And now, please accept this as a simple token of my appreciation.”

Drawing forth a golden ring from his hand, Pedro gave it to Estevan. “I would like to say that this has been a family heirloom for many generations. But actually, I got this from the siege on the great Aztecan city not long ago.

Look, in it is embedded a stupendous gem. It dazzled my eye when it sat in the pile of booty, and see, it sparkles in the light of the sun. Please, keep it for a friend’s sake.”

Estevan scrutinized it carefully. Turning it this way and that, he stared at the ring, set with a magnificent ruby.

Indeed, the light of the morning sun refracted well inside the jewel, and the ruby appeared to shine with its own energy. Its crimson depths glowed and beckoned with a strange mystery that seemed fathomless beyond the ages.

He brought it up close before his face, studied the inscription on the inside of the band, and read out loud in Mayan to himself. “*Ryth maxaqtacca cuwq zonevx.*’ But that can’t be...Hesan, come look at this!” Estevan handed it to his son.

Hesan stared at it in disbelief for several seconds before finally muttering grimly, “I don’t believe it—this must be some sick joke. No stupid ring is going tell me what to do with my life, not by a long shot!”

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In the middle of the night, the watchman challenged an approaching group of Spanish cavalry. They appeared unsettled, as though something had greatly startled them.

The horses were spooked, snorting and pawing the ground nervously. “Who goes there—friend or *enemigo*?”

In reply, the scouting party’s second-in-command shouted back at the guard, “You’d better move it, punk, or I’ll wring your neck! It’s me, Sanchez, of the scout squad.

Tu Madre’s been captured, and we were attacked by a horrible beast that brutally slaughtered the whole gang...er, it would’ve if I hadn’t scared it away. I need to talk to the Big Kahuna, and I mean now!”

Knowing that Sanchez—who was called el Caballero Oscuro, or, the Dark Knight—was not to be trifled with, the watchman grudgingly let him inside and ushered him to the back of the encampment. Cortez’s tent palace stood tall in the moonlight, with huge, heavy ropes holding it together and openings letting the harshly artificial light out of the tent.

Sanchez stared at the lair of the Spanish monster and remembered how badly Cortez treated his soldiers. When it dawned on him what was waiting for him inside the tent, Sanchez tried to back out of it. “Hey, buddy, I just realized, uh, this isn’t something I need to talk to the boss about, maybe just to one of the generals. Yeah, no need to risk your neck. Let’s go to them.”

However, the guard was secretly glad to be rid of his old enemy. “No. You ask to see Cortez, you see Cortez.

And make sure you get a good look at the sky. Tonight is the full moon, and it may be your last time to see it.” He chuckled without humor as he shoved Sanchez up the crude stairs into Cortez’s presence.

El Caballero Oscuro made a mental note to get back at the guard. However, he now needed to focus on the matter at hand. The new scout leader had the sense to crawl along the floor to the makeshift throne.

A furious bellow shook the room. “Who is this man?! And why does he choose to court with doom by entering my presence unannounced?”

Sanchez trembled visibly for effect before whispering,

“Your highness, exalted one, please show grace to me with your ears.”

Cortez erupted into temporary excitement. “Have you found me more gold? Answer me quickly, speck of dust, before I lose my temper!”

Inside, the Spanish knight was disgusted at the act he had to put on, but he knew that Cortez demanded to be treated like a king—no, like a god. Sanchez had worked hard to earn his position in the army, and he was not about to lose it over an issue of personal pride.

Personally, Sanchez hated the spineless way Cortez commanded his armies, by slaughtering the entire city of Aztecs after pretending to parley. He had stayed back at camp during the siege to avoid joining in the blood bath.

Looking back, he realized that the only reason he had hopped on the ship to the “West Indies” was to provide income for his poor mother back at home in Madrid. He wondered if it was worth putting up with Cortez’s sense of injustice.

Now he remembered what he had wanted to tell his superior commander—and it had nothing to do with gold.

He knew that in order to keep his head, he would have to think up of something on the spot.

The first thing that popped into his brain was this:

“Cortez, the highest of the gods, the grandest of the earth, I have discovered a dragon with a hoard of your favorite kind of gold.” His head spun at the fib, and he knew that if the truth were discovered, his head would spin onto the ground.

His eyes narrowing slightly, Cortez rumbled, “Tell me more of this dragon.”

A frigid wave of horror and sweat washed down Sanchez’s back as he remembered what his leader had done to others before him, but he continued to develop his story. “You see, your grace, my fellows and I have narrowly escaped an encounter with the murderous creature. With its large claws and gigantic teeth, it has swept all the riches from the surrounding countryside. It guards a large cave filled with its plunder. If your servant could but be equipped with more men, guns, and cannons, we could kill it, sacrifice it to your holiness, and then return the gold that is rightfully yours to your treasury—if it would please you, master.”

Cortez murmured oily, “If it would please me?” A deadly silence followed. After ten years passed for Sanchez, Cortez looked up suddenly. As if awakening from a deep slumber, his eyes were bleary and his facial features were blank. He stared over Sanchez’s shoulder before gazing at him like it was the first time he had realized that Sanchez was kneeling there.

Cortez asked him, “Am I a good leader, soldier? Wait—what is your name?”

Too stunned to reply, Sanchez did not answer.

“Tell me, fool! *Cómo se llama?*!” Cortez bellowed.

Sanchez’s stopped tongue stuttered into speech. “S-S-S-Sanchez, your majesty.”

Cortez mused, almost to himself, “‘Majesty’, eh? Sanchez, be honest with me. I want to come level with you, so tell me everything you’ve heard about me in camp.”

Sanchez could not believe his ears. Was this some sort of trap? Cortez seemed rather unstable, but maybe that was just because Sanchez was afraid for his life and suspected anything. But whatever the circumstance, Sanchez knew that he needed to play along.

Swallowing a boulder, he coughed and provided, “Your Excellency, I could say without any doubt that you are a stern ruler—I mean, leader, and you expect high discipline among your troops. Should I continue?”

Cortez raised his tired eyes from the ground. In a voice that could almost be called tender, he responded,

“Do you wish to continue?”

Sanchez was practically shocked stupid. Had Cortez really snapped? Or was he hearing things? Finally, he just answered, “No, I guess that’s all. So, how about that dragon?”

Cortez seemed knocked for a loop. “What dragon?”

Frustrated, Sanchez caught himself just before he started to admonish Cortez. Instead, he recalled the hundreds of ways Cortez could torture him and immediately found tolerance and patience within himself.

“Uh, the one my squad and I found, with the gold?”

As soon as he mentioned the word gold, the weary look in Cortez’s eye dimmed and was instantly replaced by a fierce, almost animal-like glare. “Gold? Have you found me more gold?”

Sanchez, realizing that he had already answered that question several minutes ago, nevertheless responded quickly. “Yes, my liege. I just need a troop of men with cannons to defeat it and gain entrance to its lair to get your gold.”

Cortez pondered for only a moment and said, “The men and guns are yours. Bring me the dragon’s head, and you and your men will be saved. Bring me back the treasure, and I will promote you to captain. But if you fail on your venture and have the guts to come back to me, those guts of yours will be prepared for my daily meal!”

Sanchez was confused, but he figured that whatever may have been plaguing Cortez moments earlier, it plagued him no longer. So he treated the last few minutes like they had never happened. He lifted his head and kissed the toes of the man in front of him, hiding his disgust, thanking Cortez profusely for his generosity and care for his soldiers.

It is difficult to get the knack of crawling backwards, but it is a necessity for the Spanish army. Of course, it also leaves no room for error. Walking around the camp, one might even come across a soldier practicing such skill.

Sanchez crept on all fours, not once halting his constant show of homage until he was out of Cortez’s sight. He was glad to have kept all of his body parts, at least for now. Once down the stairs and out of the tent, he ran over to *tu Madre*’s contingent—now under his command.

“All right, *niños*! We have work to do. Gather up new armor, get some sleep, and grab some fresh horses in the morning. Tomorrow is the chance of a lifetime. We’re going to kill a dragon. I’ll explain later.” The group looked askance at el

Caballero Oscuro and then followed his instructions without question. Who knew what went on in his mind? Then again, who wanted to know?

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Estevan spoke. “Sir Pedro, I am certainly surprised to see this ring. I’d explain this right now, but it’s time to eat.

As my guest, I hereby invite you to join me for breakfast, and so I would look forward to seeing your face at the table.” Estevan left in the direction of the dining room after giving Hesan a purposeful nod, obviously with an implied meaning.

Pedro looked at Hesan, who returned his gaze. In a low tone, the chief’s oldest son addressed the Spaniard,

“Sir Pedro, I must speak to you after breakfast about this.

The ring in your hand has more history behind it than all the generations of your family. But for now, my family will show you the hospitality of the tribe of Kirtech!”

The four entered the eating room of the hut and came to a low table. Pedro was amazed to see no benches or chairs, but cushions on the floor, a custom unfamiliar to him. Seeing the others recline on their sides on the soft, feather stuffed pillows, the Spaniard followed suit.

Hesan’s two sisters set the table with embroidered cloth napkins, empty dishes, and, to Pedro’s horror, no silverware of any sort—not even a knife. Sinaj, decked out in a servant’s tunic, began lugging several yawning cauldrons with steaming contents onto the table.

The most incredible aromas wafted out of their bottomless depths. A musty, earthy odor—oats, or cooked rice, or something along that line, he thought—slowly drifted out of one. Another emitted a fresh, fruity tang, which could have been oranges or tangerines. A third smell escaped from a smaller pot and reminded Pedro of milk, but did not match exactly. Other scents that he could not even distinguish, much less describe, filled the room and eked out through several windows that let in the late sunrise.

Sinaj carried a simple wood-carved basin with rose water inside and offered it first to Estevan, who grandly dipped his rugged hands into it. Pedro watched, fascinated, as the chief washed his hands thoroughly and finished by drying his hands with the supplied cotton towel. Hesan solemnly followed his father’s example and passed the basin into Lejo’s waiting arms. Lejo energetically swished his fingers around and around before wiping them clean and dry with a dramatic flourish.

Pedro was now totally confused as to the proper execution of their custom, and so tremblingly, almost delicately, he submerged his own hands into the wash bin.

As if he were handling a snake or scorpion, he gingerly replaced the excess water into the drying cloth. When the chief’s wife took the basin from him, Pedro barely avoided letting out an audible sigh of overwhelming relief.

Without a word, the natives reached for enormous serving spoons and piled the food onto their plates, which were more like shallow bowls. They began methodically consuming a hodgepodge of steamed rice, boiled black beans, fruit salad, paper-thin cakes of maize, and cooked eggs, washing it down with goat’s milk.

The former captain was by now totally bewildered, trying to comprehend Mayan traditions in the silence that followed, until Hesan whispered to him, “Mayans do not converse while eating meals. Just dig in!”

Then, encouraged by a nod from the other five family members, Pedro José Eduardo San Xavier tucked away grub like only a Spanish soldier—who has led a scouting party, been ambushed by a jaguar, captured by a young lad, tied to a tree in the middle of a South American village, and all in a day’s work—could.

Plateful after heaping plateful disappeared into the knight’s gullet. Bit by bit, the food in the cauldrons was whittled down to the bottom. The Mayan family had long since finished eating, but the Spaniard was not satisfied until he had consumed the last of the meal. Sinaj dismissed his bulging belly laughingly, but her eyes betrayed a stern reproach.

Finally, Pedro looked down at his distended abdomen and suppressed a groan. Here he was, about to embark on a long journey to present himself to the Mayan king, with more than enough food in his gut to sustain him for several days on the march. On top of that, he had wolfed down more food than he was used to, and now he was feeling the acute pains of a stomachache. It served him right, too.

That was what disappointed himself the most. The very tribe that had captured him had treated him to a feast in his honor—without roasting him alive and eating him.

And how had he returned the favor? By eating them out of house and home.

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The fact that Hesan ignored this and forgave him did not improve his conscience. “Sir Pedro, my father wanted me to tell you that the elders decided you could stay for now. But there’s one other thing. Remember that ring?”

Well, now I can explain to you its importance.” Hesan fished around in the many pockets of his homespun tunic, one at a time, until he found it and supplied the legendary object for the Spaniard.

“Ah, then please tell away.” Pedro gazed admiringly at the ruby, the gold band, and then studied the encrypted inscription. Hesan continued the story.

“You see, the Mayans have always told the tale of an Aztec legend, of a mysterious power known in their language as maxaqtacca. This was supposedly given to a baby boy incidentally named,” here he stumbled for a second, then continued, “Hesan.

“According to the story, there was a mother who was unable to bear a child. She prayed to the Aztec gods for a son, for she and her husband were nearing old age. A long time passed, with no answer, and she nearly despaired. But, because she had prayed for so long and with so much insistence, the gods had mercy on the woman and granted her request.

“However, they did it on one condition: that they would give the child a gift of their choice. This sounded phenomenally superb to the Aztec wife. It seemed as if they were making her child better than other kids, and so she agreed. The husband, though, suspected a trick. He suggested that they be humble and ask only for a son, not for gifts. However, the gods would not hear of it, and angrily they told the mother not to listen to her husband. They banished him, and she never saw him again.

“The would-be-mother was shocked and thought that the gods had cheated her of a husband. But then, she inexplicably became with child and gave birth the following year. She was overjoyed, but before she could even nurse the boy for the first time, the gods snatched him into the sky, away from her, and reminded her of the condition. Hysterical, she promised to let them go through with their promise of a gift. They empowered the baby then and there. In loud voices, they announced that the baby would be given power over time, or, *maxaqtacca*.

“Still up in the clouds, the newborn baby named Hesan could not possibly have any knowledge or awareness of anything but his hunger, and so he wailed and cried. In his want for nourishment, he used his *maxaqtacca* unwillingly and whisked himself into another time. Then the mother realized too late that her child’s blessing was really a curse. She pleaded with the gods, swearing that if they would only take away Hesan’s *maxaqtacca*, she would sacrifice herself to them. They consented, and the boy returned to the mother’s arms, and she finally nursed him. But she forgot her oath to the gods, or else she refused to fulfill it for fear of the baby’s death without her.

„However, the gods didn’t forget. When the boy was weaned, they returned once more, and the mother remembered. She ran from the top of a cliff and dashed herself upon the rocks in the sea. But it was too late—the boy vanished. However, years after the mother died, a pearl diver discovered this ring off the shore of the cliff. They say it was created by the boy’s spirit, but I don’t believe that. It’s a sad story, isn’t it?” Hesan accepted the ring from Pedro’s hands and held it up to the early morning sun, showing it to the knight.

Pedro was fascinated. “But what does that have to do with my—I mean, this ring?” Then, he answered his own question. “Oh, so the ring is supposed to have a remnant of *maxaqtacca*, right?”

Hesan laughed, “Yes, good guess. Anyway, the inscription on the inside of the band reads, *,ryth Maxaqtacca cuwq zonevx.*’ It basically means, ‘The lord of time shall have sacrifice.’ Pretty cryptic, don’t you think?”

“Morbid is more like it,” agreed the Spaniard. “I still don’t really understand what this ring is, though.” He shivered involuntarily, even as sunlight warmed his shoulders.

Hesan shifted uncomfortably and then said forcefully, “Well, I didn’t say I did either.” Wanting to change the subject to a more appealing one, Hesan gave Pedro an off-topic question. “Out of curiosity, what do you think of the Spanish army and their position? This is probably something you’ll be asked once we’re in the capital. Would you mind telling me about it?”

But Pedro was genuinely curious about *maxaqtacca*.

“Wait a minute. I’m still hooked on this ring of mine—I mean yours. Why is it important enough to you today that your father dropped it from his hand when he saw what it was? Is there something else about it that makes it special?”

Hesan’s eyes were looking far, far away from the Spanish officer’s face. They searched past the wooden walls of the palisade. The hazel depths gazed way out, beyond the shadowy horizon, past the morning sun.

Hesan’s mind was obviously on the distant past. Nearly half a minute passed before his eyes flicked back to Pedro’s. “Sorry, I was just thinking about what my father told me.” Hesan idly fondled Valeria’s ears—the big cat never seemed to

leave her master's side. Hesan started to say something else and halt, and then those eyes of his met Pedro's.

Almost defiantly, he stated, "You know how I said that the boy was incidentally named Hesan? Well, one of the reasons my name is so uncommon among the Mayans is that, out of superstition, no family other than my own ancestors have named their sons 'Hesan.' The father in the story, though in exile, heard that his wife had sacrificed herself to the gods. He was overcome with grief and searched for the missing child for many years. After failing, he finally remarried and had more children of his own. But he never forgot the son named Hesan that he had never met, and resolved that his line would carry the name. I am descended from that man."

Pedro asked him, "What's that mean for you?"

With an intensity that bordered on anger, Hesan snapped back, "I don't know and I don't care. But I will tell you this: no stupid piece of jewelry is going to dictate how I live my own life!"

"Whoa, there!" Pedro apologized. "Okay, alright. I was just curious. I just thought you might have, I don't know, some secret powers or something."

Hesan scoffed. "Ha! Yeah, right. Like that could ever happen."

But Pedro never forgot this conversation, and eventually, he would think of it and marvel at its irony.

Chapter IV

One-Way Ticket to Where?

He knew his king was wiser than any before him. How could he question his leadership? But Knojes was still uneasy about his mission. *Would the Spaniard cooperate?*

Should he be trusted? In what way could Knojes safely transport him?

Ah, well, he told himself, at least I'm getting paid for this.

There it was in front of him: the village of Kirtech.

Gleaming in the glorious morning light, it basked in the sun's fond rays. Riding up to the gate, he called out to the keeper, "Ahoy, there! Open the gates for Knojes, the king's messenger!" Obediently, the gatekeeper unlatched the hinged planks, and the large door swung open.

Knojes rode through and noticed something immediately different from all the other Mayan clans. He had known it only in the presence of his own family before: the atmosphere. It was not thick or oppressive, nor was it greedy or seductive. Hospitality, joy, and caring washed over him in waves.

The Kirtech clan's group of huts was spread out in a five-sided pattern. In the center was the village square, a large clearing of hard packed dirt and long wooden benches. The first point of the pentagon was the chief's family's abode, with bigger dwellings and the village well.

The next consisted of the elders' council building and their own huts. Third was the biggest section, with the rest of the village folk's huts, which included the guesthouses. The fourth corner had the blacksmith, potter, carpentry, and other crafts. The fifth and final portion of the village was mostly quiet. It had the stables, the gate, and a large barracks that had only been used once, nearly three decades ago.

The whole village was surrounded entirely by a thick, wooden palisade with five small, stone lookout towers on the pentagon's points. The gate was made of sturdy wood, a serviceable block frame, and a moderately heavy set of doors. When Knojes walked through it, between the two guard towers that were easily visible from the gate, and into the village, the military establishment was the first thing he saw. He had to travel through that section of the pentagon and across the village square to get to the chief's hut.

A pleasant voice called out to him from his right, and Knojes dismounted. He walked over to the stable, and helpful hands guided his lathered horse into a hay-filled berth. "Sir Knojes, please allow me to show you to your quarters. You have ridden long and hard. Sit down and make yourself at home."

His guide, who introduced himself as Lejo, led him inside a hut with a newly made bed. Lejo pointed out a homely earthenware bowl and set down two jugs of hot and cold water. "If you need anything, just find somebody and they'll help you. Oh! By the way, what did you travel here for?"

Knojes replied, "I was sent from King Mehosha to fetch your Spanish prisoner to the palace. I thank you for your hospitality, but he ordered me to bring the Spaniard with all haste. Now, would you please guide me to where you keep the prisoner?"

"That's kind of weird. Come to think of it, just this morning, we've been preparing to journey to the capital ourselves. I guess we'll accompany you...that is, with my father's permission, of course," Lejo hastily concluded.

Estevan, having just then filled the doorway of the small hut with his frame, tilted his head reprovingly at Lejo.

He then turned his full attention to the visitor to his clan.

"Sir Knojes, I would like to welcome you to the Kirtech village. You may call me Estevan," and he extended a broad, work-browned hand. Grasping the proffered arm at the elbow in the traditional Mayan greeting, Knojes offered his own right arm to Estevan, who accepted it warmly.

Continuing, Estevan invited Knojes into his own hut for a private meal and chat. "If you will, there is breakfast for the two of us in my house. There we could discuss the plight of Sir Pedro, our Spanish prisoner."

But Knojes firmly shook his head at that. "My sincerest apologies, Chief Estevan, but my king has ordered me to return with Sir Pedro immediately. And I'm afraid that means I can't stop for a bite to eat."

Estevan would have none of it. "My good man, you have likely been riding hard all night to get here. It would be denying yourself too much for you not to eat. Besides, there really is an issue for us to decide, and that would be the place my son has in all of this."

At that, Knojes looked questioningly at Lejo, who at that moment was sitting on the bed, idly bouncing up and down. Lejo returned his gaze with a sheepish grin

and shrugged. Estevan answered the knight's wordless query with a laugh. "Why, not that one! He is my younger son. My eldest, Hesan, is the one who captured Sir Pedro."

Now Knojes showed interest. He did not want to treat the Kirtech chief like he was just a distraction or obstacle, and he found that he was beginning to like this village and the people in it. So, he consented. "Well, then, I guess it wouldn't delay me too much. If you wish, I would be delighted to be introduced to your oldest son and his captive."

Abruptly, Lejo jumped up and dashed out of the hut, calling Hesan to meet the busy messenger of the king. He ran across the village, feet pounding the dust into the already hard-packed dirt. Lejo narrowly missed an older woman carrying a heavy jar of water, dodging around her and her little granddaughter. But the girl tripped over a small cat, knocked her mother over, and the whole jar spilled its contents.

The resulting splash threw water onto everyone within a ten-foot radius. "Sorry, Lady Krinj!" Lejo yelled over his shoulder, and then he slammed to a screeching halt right in front of a large crowd meeting outside the elders' section of the village. He realized that for him to take a detour through the barracks would be faster than for him to weave through the throng.

Turning around, he had to face Krinj again. She made him cringe under the onslaught of her verbal accusations and her furiously wagging index finger. Lejo backed away, apologizing profusely to mother, daughter, and kitten.

Since the village square was expressively off-limits to kids, Lejo backtracked to the villagers' portion, skirting the village square as closely as he dared, and then hurried through the smith's and crafters' section. Nothing in his life had prepared Lejo for the sight awaiting his eyes just ahead of him.

The stables were full. The barracks was overflowing.

The training courts were occupied. And the most surprising sight: an elder, whom Lejo recognized as the oldest in the village, and a much younger, military-looking character were both instructing men in the art of war. In all of Lejo's fourteen years on the earth, he had never seen anyone actively training. Why they were now, after all this time, Lejo had no idea.

As he watched, a pair of sparring, jabbing, would-be-soldiers clashed swords again and again until one found an opening in the other's guard and made a glancing sweep across his opponent's ribs. All of the training swords were made of a soft wood, but the force of the blow knocked the recipient to the ground. The unfortunate one grimaced with pain and held back a groan. He latched onto the hand offered to him by his victor and rose to congratulate his opponent.

Lejo saw them both go on to swap partners, and all the men in the yard who were not still going at it started again. He suddenly felt a childish excitement and longed to try sword fighting with the men. His feet unknowingly brought him forward. In awe, he stared wistfully at the blur of training men and weapons. Fortunately, he soon remembered his mission and finished cutting through the barracks area to find Hesan. He looked over his shoulder, to glance one more time at the strange occurrence, and then he went on to look somewhere else.

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A deep rumbling sound filled the stables, but the horses did not even bat an eyelid. It was often that they heard this noise, and it was usually accompanied by humming or whistling. Hesan stroked Valeria's back, and it was her purring that was rumbling through the stable.

He was singing under his breath, and the musical words were absorbed by the hay spilled throughout the stable floor. At a young age, he had realized that music helped him think better. Whenever he had a tough choice to make, or just wanted some quiet time, he usually came here and snuggled up with Valeria to his own music.

Again, he had tried comprehending the strange occurrence of the previous day. And again, it still made no sense to him. After growing tired of pondering the issue, he finally changed gears to a thought that he could more easily tackle.

Today, Hesan had overheard his father talking to a visiting messenger. After he caught his name and realized what he would be asked, he left to seek solitude before Lejo came looking for him.

So, the decision on which Hesan was meditating was whether to go with Knojes to the capital. He had only left his village once, not counting hunting trips, when he was seven and a half years old to see the Decennial Parade Celebration at the palace along with the rest of his family.

There had been an amazing variety of horse-drawn floats, soldiers, marching musicians, and wheeling, whirling acrobats. The food, too, had been spectacular and in great abundance.

What had mesmerized little Hesan the most was the orchestra concert performed in the Mayan stadium. The notes had echoed across the stadium's walls, built precisely to reflect the waves of sound across every inch of it, and Hesan had been enchanted by the music itself. It was so full of beauty and so awed him that he finally awoke, as if from a daze, halfway back to their village. Ever since, Hesan couldn't wait for the next decennial concert. Now, almost ten years later, he thought back to his time there.

Lejo's insistent shouting brought him back to the present. "Hesan! Where are you? Sir Knojes and Dad are talking about you going to the capital! Can you hear me? Hesan! HESAN!!"

Grinning to Valeria, Hesan quietly got up from the hay and stalked around the back of the stable to stand behind his brother. "HEESAAAAN!!!! WHERr-oOo-aaAAUGHH!" Lejo's last shout turned into a terrified yelp as he turned around at a tap to his shoulder.

"I'm right here, Lejo. There's no reason to yell,"

Hesan chided. He headed towards the guesthouse where he presumed Estevan would still be trying to convince Knojes to rest. He called back to Lejo, who was still visibly shaken,

"Lejo! Are you trying to turn into a living statue?"

After receiving a horrible, grimacing expression from his brother, Hesan reproached him. "And don't make faces. If you're not careful, your face might one day freeze like that." At that, Lejo gleefully held his expression in a mask not unlike the one he just showed Hesan, only with a little more tongue sticking out the side of his mouth.

With a disgusted sigh, Hesan turned away and was confronted with the same sight that had stopped his sibling earlier. Unlike Lejo, he realized almost immediately that the appearance of Pedro, along with his news of the approaching Spaniards, had spooked the village into preparing themselves for battle.

Walking through the grounds, he stopped suddenly at the thought that he might have to prepare for battle also, with his being almost eighteen years old and considered of military age to fight for his people.

Muttering to himself, he took advantage of the stroll through the training yard to let his sharp eyes pick up some fighting stances and combat moves. It then occurred to him that he would need his two companions where he was going. “Lejo, I’ll catch up with you in a minute. I need to take my halberd with me.”

Performing an “about-face,” Hesan double-timed it back to the stables where he had left Haeldar. Entering the stables, he picked up his weapon and his train of thought before he had been interrupted. Concluding his meditating, Hesan confirmed his earlier decision to join Knojes on his journey to Murixcanaoy.

With Haeldar and Val at his side, Hesan felt quite ready to take on the world. Walking, tall and proud, through the training courts, he proved too tempting a target for the training master. The man started rattling on and on to Hesan about how important it was for him to consider joining their militia, how as a young man, he must take up the responsibility of the chief’s eldest son, and how crucial it was that Hesan lead them for the *esprit de corps*.

Life tolerating his little brother had taught Hesan to have an almost boundless patience for other people. So Hesan dutifully waited for the master to finish his lecture and finally threw a smart salute and excused himself. “Sir!

Yes, sir. My apologies, but Chief Estevan waits for me to begin a venture with Messenger Knojes from the capital.”

Receiving his leave and a brief smile from the trainer, Hesan hurried through the rest of the barracks area.

Unlike Lejo, he was allowed to commute through the village square, so he expected to catch up with Lejo at the corner of the square nearest the guesthouse. After a few minutes of waiting for his little brother, Hesan finally went on to the guesthouse without him. He overheard his father talking to an unfamiliar voice he suspected to be Knojes.

Hesan listened a little while and caught pieces of conversation floating to him—something about the Spanish army, the capital, King Mehosha, and extracting information from the Spaniard.

Tiptoeing softly towards them, Hesan popped out from behind a hut. “Hello, father,” he hailed as he nodded to Knojes in respect, “did you send for me?” Finally, Lejo arrived, puffing and blowing from the long detour around the village market, to avoid certain old women and their pet cats. In answer to his older son’s question, Estevan thanked Lejo for getting Hesan to come and see his father and guest.

Knojes addressed Hesan sternly. “Young man, it is my duty to return to the capital city of Murixcanaoy with your Spanish prisoner. It is now your decision as to whether or not you go with him.”

He looked at Estevan, who told him, “Hesan, this is only your choice, and I do not wish to influence you in it. But as advice, I think that it would not be a wise

idea to leave so soon. You'll be leaving home for good in a few years to find a house and to start a family of your own, and then you'll wish you had spent more time at home."

Hesan knew that if he didn't answer in a moment, he would start to think about his father's words, which was something he would rather not do. Instead, he quickly said, "Yes, I will go to Murixcanaoy."

Instantly, Lejo hopped into the discussion with "I'm going! Don't forget me! I want to go too! You can't leave without me! If you leave without me, your expedition will surely fail! If you leave without me then our world will be overthrown by Spanish terrorists and their diseases will bring us to our knees and eventually the Americas will be colonized by millions of white men and us natives will slowly diminish to near-extinction, and, and, and, and...please, could I go?" By then, Lejo was kneeling in the dirt, begging with his hands clasped together.

Knojes was not amused, but Estevan was curious.

"Really, Lejo, why is it that you want to go so badly?"

Lejo's mouth opened, closed, and opened, like a fish gasping for air, but no sound came out of it.

Estevan continued, "I know that you would like to be with your big brother, but this is something that only he should do. I don't think it would be a good idea for you to come along. And you know that under no circumstances would your mother allow you to leave home!"

However, Sinaj seemed to have other thoughts. She chose that moment to appear unexpectedly. Walking up to the heated group, she disagreed. "Nonsense, Estevan. I think now would be a great time for the boys to go out into the world together." Both Hesan and Lejo groaned.

"My sons, I think that your father and I will have a short little talk alone. If you would please excuse us, Sir Knojes...?"

Knojes and the two boys were left to themselves.

After a stunned silence, Lejo asked the royal messenger a question. "Um, Sir Knojes, so what will we need to do to get ready to leave on our trip?"

The man blinked, and then he scolded Lejo. "Now, now, boy, your father will have the sole voice in deciding whether you go or not. So for the time being, Hesan will need to pack up all of the clothes he expects to wear, of course, and should probably bring along any weapons he has. With the Spanish roaming the countryside, who knows what might meet us on the road? In fact, Lejo, how would you feel if a Spanish cavalry unit charged you?"

Lejo responded with a childish-sounding swagger, "Why, if they'd charged me, I'd punchem their lights outed!" Playfully, he swung a few jabs at his older brother, who stepped quickly to one side.

Noting Hesan's reflexes, Knojes advised him. "That move may come in handy if we meet trouble. You know what? I bet you could train with me on the road with some fighting techniques."

Remembering the sergeant at the barracks courtyard, Hesan spoke his disappointment. "One of the reasons I wanted to take this trip is because I thought I could get out of the whole 'defend your family' thing. I guess that's not going to happen."

Knojes looked at Hesan seriously. “Part of growing up is learning the responsibility to fight to protect what’s yours. That means learning to use weapons, because in this world are people who combat using physical harms, not just with words or authority.”

Lejo exchanged glances with Hesan and recognized that all too soon, he would also have to grow up. As he packed his belongings later, he wished then that he had not been so eager to come with them.

Chapter V

Journey to Murixcanaoy.

Thinking back on his hurried departure, Lejo realized that he should have taken his stretchy mass of tree sap rubber to keep himself occupied. Instead, he had rushed to stick his clothes, a small pouch with most of his money, and some snacks in a little bag.

As mothers will, Sinaj had insisted Lejo take a few hundred additional pairs of underwear, but Estevan said that it was time he learned to pack for himself. However, Lejo comforted himself with the fact that he still had his weapon of choice from the barracks.

Called a *macana*, this wooden club slightly resembled a sword. It was more paddle-shaped—less than four inches wide and only an inch thick. On the end, and usually along the sides, sharp chunks of obsidian were embedded in the wood. The weapon was traditionally Aztec in origin, but the design was largely a staple for most of South America’s warriors.

Lejo wore a belt to hold his *macana* to his waist, but because his legs were not fully grown, the weapon hung down to his ankles. Occasionally, he would trip over it and, at such times, pull his belt higher on his hip. Unhooking the club from his belt, Lejo now looked at the spikes on his formidable weapon. After twirling it through the air a couple times, he received a rather aloof shake of Knojes’s disapproving head, and he put it back.

A Mayan warrior’s combat attire also normally included long shields made from animal hide and a tunic padded with rock salt to be worn as armor. However, for the purpose of quicker traveling, this group had opted out of the extra weight.

The party was marching through open terrain. They had left most of the jungle trees behind, and the ground was rocky with sparse vegetation.

Hesan and Pedro were engaged in some conversation, talking about what sounded to him like a city of the Spanish people. An eagle warrior named Huamec seldom spoke, and when he did speak, it was only to his companion, a spearman called Ijeld.

The only others in their party on the road were Valeria and the archer, Dovan. Lejo knew that Valeria, as a rule, stuck close to her owner and did not like Lejo to pet her too much. Dovan had been altogether uninteresting to Lejo and was generally quiet for the duration of the march.

After trudging a few more steps, Lejo decided to chat a little with Dovan, who was one of the family heads in the Kirtech village. Quickening his pace to match Dovan's, Lejo introduced himself. "Archer Dovan, my name is Lejo.

„Estevan's my dad, and I think I've probably seen you around the village. Anyway, I have a question for you."

"Just call me Dovan," the kindly fellow replied. "Ask away." Dovan was not that old for a family head. He was only a few years married, with a toddler and a newborn child for kids. He was stocky, but not overly tall, just about average, really. It was his eyes that were extraordinary.

Matching the light chocolate brown of his face, his eyes were warm enough to melt butter, and they seemed to see straight through Lejo.

Encouraged by the polite reply, Lejo let fly with his question. "I was just wondering, why are you still an archer? I heard that archers were the lowest rank in the Aztec's armies. Don't you think that it would be better for your family if you became a warrior, like Sir Knojes?"

Dovan answered promptly, "No. I think my family realizes just how much I love them by staying an archer, and not becoming a higher rank, because I have to work harder now than I would if I became an Eagle Warrior."

Lejo still wanted to know why Dovan did not advance in rank. Inwardly, he was convinced that Dovan was something of a pacifist, or at least did not prefer to fight head to head for glory in battle.

But Lejo never had the chance to ask, for Knojes abruptly called a halt. Pedro and Hesan stopped talking and looked ahead towards the king's messenger, as did the rest of the voyagers. "All right, you guys! Arms check! And that means you, Lejo—you must examine your weapon carefully for defects. And don't go eating more of your dinner!" he added, as Lejo had gotten out his food pouch, opened it, and had a piece of dried meat half way to his mouth.

"Rats!" Lejo complained. "I keep feeling like I left my stomach behind, grazing back along the plain past the village. And that's where I'll be going if we don't get to eat some food real soon." Dovan grinned at Lejo and covertly handed him a small piece torn from his own pastry. Lejo gleefully wolfed it down before Knojes could spot him.

Hesan commented to Pedro, "Maybe then we'd get some peace around here. Ask Sir Knojes if he would suspend the rations for a day." That got a laugh from the Spanish captain as Hesan put Haeldar down onto a flat stone and began sharpening the steel tip. Pedro mechanically took out an invisible musket and had begun looking for his polishing cloth before he remembered that he no longer carried any weapons.

"Hey, Sir Knojes!" he called. The Mayan warrior turned to him, and he continued. "What if we get ambushed by some wild animals and I need a sword or something? Shouldn't I at least be allowed to carry a simple knife? I won't try escaping, and young master Hesan can vouch for me on that."

Knojes glared at the dark-bearded man in front of him. It was obvious that he did not trust him as much as Hesan did, and so he shook his head decisively. "No, you are not to have any weapon at all. That's unheard of—arming a prisoner!? No. If we are attacked, you will stay in the center of us for protection, but completely unarmed."

Huamec and Ijeld looked pleased. Hesan frowned at Knojes but did not object.

“Now,” Knojes continued, “all of you except for Sir Pedro will begin to practice with your weapons. You will do this in an orderly fashion. And Lejo, remember. Your macana is not a toy, so do not treat it like one.” After he finished bossing them, he stomped away from the group to begin setting camp for the night.

Lejo thought to himself, *Boy, Sir Knojes sure woke up on the wrong side of his sleeping pad today. I hope he stubs his toe on a rock and falls.* He knew that he was capable of treating his weapon with care and respect, and he was not exactly sure why the hardened soldier had brought up the issue.

However, it would make precious little difference to argue and so, with a sigh, Lejo unbuckled his macana and began ceremoniously swishing it through the air in practice.

The other statues tired of staying still, and in the silence that followed the tirade, Hesan and Pedro stood and walked over to the little brother and his archer friend.

Lejo suggested, “What say we practice together, and then Sir Pedro could, uh, watch us and give pointers? Maybe Hesan and I could take turns sparring with you, Dovan. That way you’d have something to do, also.”

But the archer shook his head. “No, Lejo. Your idea is fine, but I need to go talk with Sir Knojes. I’ve known him for a long while, from before I lived in our village, and I recognize that something is bothering him. Sir Pedro, why don’t you watch Hesan and Lejo practice together and show them proper fighting techniques?” Turning away, Dovan straightened his back and shoulders and marched over to where the royal messenger was futilely trying to assemble a tent single-handedly.

The two other soldiers had already begun, and the crack of spear against spear reached the brothers’ ears.

Taking a deep breath, Lejo lifted his macana into the air...and was promptly disarmed by a swift whack to his hand from the flat of Haeldar’s ax end. The macana went flying out of his hands into the dirt, and Lejo scrambled to recover it.

“Come on, now, Lejo! Who taught you how to handle your weapon, anyway?” Pedro chided. The younger student just shook the light brown curls of his head.

“First things first, you always hold weapons with both hands unless you’re either holding a shield or if it’s smaller than a sword. Especially a boy your size can’t expect to brandish a club with only one hand!” Pedro took the macana in his hands and showed Lejo how to hold it along the handle with one hand just below the other.

Lejo took a few moments to get used to this new fighting stance and then faced off against his older brother again. It was only a few seconds before a flick of Hesan’s wrist sent the macana flying out of Lejo’s grasp. Pedro reminded him, “Remember, Lejo, you’re not holding a napkin in your fingers, so grip tightly!”

But he changed his mind after Lejo clung to the club with a white-knuckled grip. “No, no, no. Pretend that you, hmm...that you’re carrying a young infant—yes, that’s it! Like you have to make sure it doesn’t fall right out of your hands, but also not so tightly that you suffocate it. That’s perfect! Now, try again.”

Now, Hesan had a little more trouble neutralizing his brother, so after Lejo got in a few whacks against Haeldar, Hesan just knocked him down by swinging the shaft into his chest. With a loud “oof,” the younger boy landed heavily upon his

rear end. Groaning and loudly complaining, Lejo slowly rose and picked up his club.

“Well done, Lejo. Next time, make sure not to get hit full-on with your enemy’s spear. You’re allowed to use your own weapon to block their blows. Or, if you have the time, try to dodge out of the way, maybe even press your advantage if you catch them off balance.”

At a nod from the Spanish trainer, Hesan began another round by solidly checking Lejo with the middle of Haeldar’s staff. Lejo blocked the blow with his macana, but his whole body staggered considerably from the force of it.

Hesan spun Haeldar in a circle, connecting the side of the pointed end with Lejo’s shoulder.

As he felt the jarring thwack of wood against bone, Lejo was certain that he had lost the match again.

However, as he fell to the side, he rolled in an experimental attempt to recover his footing on the other side of his older brother. Popping up from the ground, he faced another check from Hesan and then let his legs bend to absorb the knock to his club. This made Hesan’s balance fall slightly forward, which was all that Lejo needed to penetrate his guard with a quick thrust to Hesan’s diaphragm. Grunting and doubling over, Hesan was helpless to protect himself.

With a broad smile, Pedro called the match to an end.

“Nice job, both of you!” he chuckled. But Hesan did not consider the fight over. Reaching out with the shaft of his halberd, he pressed against the pit of Lejo’s knee, causing the unfortunate brother to collapse.

Furious, Lejo sprang to his feet, flung aside the macana, and tackled Hesan. Hesan soon lost Haeldar, and the two were just scuffling hand-to-hand. Rolling around on the hard ground, the two brothers wrestled and tussled and tried to pin the other. Though Hesan was two and a half years older than his brother, Lejo was built more solidly, and so Hesan could not get the upper hand.

Finally, the two of them were so exhausted that they simply stopped. Hesan rolled onto his back, panting, and Lejo gasped out, “Sir Pedro, who won?”

The two boys looked so comical after fighting so fiercely, and Lejo’s question seemed so ridiculous, that Pedro had to laugh. Almost immediately, Hesan started to chuckle hoarsely. Soon, Knojes and Dovan turned to observe this interruption, and so Lejo could not resist joining in, too.

Sometimes in life, there are quirks and twists that change events in the most unexpected ways. Knojes, who had been altogether grumpy and was practically arguing with Dovan, spontaneously erupted in a series of tight, loud, and irritatingly hilarious laughs. This was what the Dovan was waiting for, and when he began producing deep, belly guffaws, Huamec and Ijeld took it as a cue and joined the group of hysterical journeyers. Echoing across the barren desert was the sound of mankind at his funniest.

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Certainly, this was a sight for Sanchez’s sore eyes.

Through his own spyglass—which had an inky black mark on the eyepiece, doubtless the work of a prankster—he witnessed the total breakdown of what might have proved a perplexing challenge for his squad.

Muttering under his breath about someone who had a fountain pen and too much time on his hands, Sanchez reached for a handkerchief to wipe away the dark ring around his eye socket. He turned his horse around and headed to camp to report that there was no problem with staying to their course ahead.

“Move it, you slugs!” he shouted to the cannon wagons. “How can you expect to surprise attack a dragon if you can’t move faster than a dead cow?” El Caballero Oscuro shook his head in exasperation and thought about how he had gotten himself into this mess.

Marching behind him was a fully-armed squadron of cavalry and two squadrons of infantry, complemented with artillery. Dubbed the “Dragon-Slayers” in a spur-of-the-moment departure, the company beneath him was quite capable of taking on an entire flock of dragons.

He thought, *Man, Cortez must real y be losing it to actual y expend all these resources on folly such as this. A dragon? God must be looking out for me. Dear mother, I miss you.*

Right now, the only plan before him besides returning to Cortez empty-handed was to get all the way to the rumored Spanish colony in Florida. Not for the first time, he wondered if it would go better for him if he actually defected to the Mayans. Since the Mayans had nearly sufficient people to counter the Spaniards, if not the equipment, then perhaps the edge this party would give them would be enough to turn the tide. Perhaps, Cortez would retain enough sense to surrender and retreat to Spain, never to return again. And while I’m dreaming, Sanchez thought miserably, I might as well wish for my father back.

At that moment, it dawned on him: if the Mayan army combined with his own party, they might be able to ambush the Spanish army, one contingent at a time. There, and only there, the possibility of victory existed.

But each time he planned a way to help the Mayans win, the inevitable end was not worth it. Realistically, Cortez would be infuriated at the disloyalty of his men and either kill them all himself or just pit them against the Mayans. Neither outcome was preferable.

Just then, he overheard a few of his men grumbling among themselves about the lousy job Cortez seemed to be doing on this campaign and how much they wanted to just turn around and sail home for sunny Spain. Wishing to keep his men disciplined for as long as possible, Sanchez decided to give them some action.

“Okay, men! It’s time to look alive! There’s a group of dangerous natives another half a mile in this direction. We’re going to sneak up on them and show them what happens to guys who mess with our squadron! Stay quiet now. We don’t want to give away our location.” No grumbling was to be heard for at least several minutes, as the eighty soldiers crept up to their victim.

For the rest of his life, Sanchez could only ponder in wonder and amazement when he remembered what happened next.

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Pacing back and forth, King Mehosha meditated carefully on the Maya’s predicament as Woab looked on.

Wrinkling his forehead in deep thought, he would alternate looking up at the high ceiling of the dining room and down at his royal feet. Every once in a while he

would stop pacing and start hemming and hawing, sometimes putting his finger in the air as if to say a few words, but then change his mind before he uttered a single syllable.

As younger brother of the king, Woab knew that this was a habit of Mehosha when in cogitation. Not for the first time, King Mehosha suddenly looked straight at Woab and tilted his head to the side as if searching for inspiration there. This time, however, he spoke.

“My brother, I can think of no way outside of military force to save our people from the destruction that Cortez clearly intends for them. My heart grieves because a battle will cost so much Mayan blood. But Montezuma had great wisdom regarding peaceful negotiations, and still Cortez murdered him and the Aztecs. I know that I could do no better. We can only try a certain amount of times to persuade Cortez aside before it becomes useless and only hardens his attitude even more.” The king’s eyes moistened.

“This realization leaves me with no choice but to try to beat back the Spanish army with our own. Here is where you come in, Woab. You know how little father taught me about warfare to try to discourage me from dabbling in it.”

Blowing his kingly nose into a handkerchief provided by his giant brother, King Mehosha sniffed and then continued, “As you can guess, I will sleep on this tonight and call out my decision in the morning. Have you any insight to give me?” For a moment, his face seemed to be so young.

Woab took a deep breath. It greatly disturbed him to see his emotional brother trying to tackle what could easily become the most challenging concern of his reign, if not the vast majority of Mayan history. “If you were not my brother, I might callously begin to explain to you the morose details of military strategy. But since you are my family, just as you are also my king, I have only to give you courage. As Aelyon commands us, *be strong*.”

At this, Mehosha began to weep softly. Woab put his titanic arm around the royal shoulders of his older sibling comfortingly and finished. “But at the same time, He reminds us that it’s not only in our own strength, but in His mighty power! Aelyon will never forsake us, and so I would prefer you to sleep on that tonight.” The sun had long before set on the country, leaving the stars and moon in the pitch black sky as reminders of the Creator’s love to help Woab comfort his brother.

Finally leaving his older brother for the night, he went home for the first time in several months. He walked the darkened streets of Murixcanaoy, taking in the crisp night air. Stopping at the door frame—that he had built himself—Woab heaved a great sigh of relief. He stepped inside, took in a huge gulp of the familiar atmosphere, and let it out with a heartfelt call. “I made it! I’m home!”

At the sound of his voice, Woab’s wife came running with an astounded expression on her face. “Woab, you’re back! I, I didn’t know if, if...but you’ve returned! You’re home!”

In wordless wonder, his two teenagers entered the room to regard their beloved father with wide eyes and mouths ajar. His daughter, Eilemé, was the first to run straight into the huge arms of her dad, followed closely behind by her younger brother Yert.

Those gigantic muscles, though strong enough to hold half a dozen men at bay, tenderly wrapped around them all, lifting them off their feet. Engulfed in the love emanating from that embrace, the four could only let time go by until finally Woab set them back down.

At last, they found words pouring forth in an endless tirade of questions that were not interrupted, even though the ceaseless babble could not possibly be understood.

Tears of joy streamed from their faces unheeded.

Eventually, they quieted down. Simply overjoyed by the reunion of his family, Woab did not need to say anything.

He let the silence be filled with the grateful comfort they all felt in their hearts.

Chapter VI

A Surprising Attack.

Wiping the teardrops from his happy, brown eyes, Knojes tried to calm the others down. Fortunately, they had gotten their fill of laughter and were now ready to start setting up camp.

“Well, guys, I guess we should eat something now. I know I have a big appetite after all that. So, Hesan and Lejo, go and collect some firewood. Archer Dovan, help me finish putting up this tent. Sir Pedro, be a good man and stay put where you are. Huamec and Ijeld, get ready to start a fire and keep an eye on our captive.” Still smiling, he joined Dovan at the tent.

Hesan was glad to be rid of Knojes’s rotten mood and grinned back at his Spanish friend. Thinking back on the past few days, he was amazed by all that had happened. It had begun with a harmless romp through the forest on a hunt with Valeria and turned into a full-fledged adventure.

Ah, life was good.

Gazing out on the horizon, Hesan took a deep breath—and let it out in a gasp. “Sir Knojes! Sir Knojes! Look over there! Do you see what I see?” He ran over to Knojes, who followed the young man’s arm to where the finger pointed.

With a small exclamation of his own, the Mayan messenger affirmed the sighting. “All right, everyone.

Plan’s changed. It’s a good thing Hesan spotted them as soon as he did...there’s a whole group of Cortez’s army in that direction. I don’t know if they’ve seen us yet, but it’s very likely. Just in case, take down the tents, all of you. If they haven’t seen us yet, then we might still be able to hide.

But if they do find us, then the only chance we have against a group that big is try to surprise them with a rush when they’re still readying themselves for combat. I’ll try to see if they’re heading in our direction. And then find a place to hide from the Spanish.”

The camp instantly transformed into a flurry of action, and Hesan quickly found himself assisting Pedro with untying the ropes holding up the tent. "I suppose we should all stay quiet so that the Spaniards can't hear us."

The Spaniard in their own party nodded in agreement and subsequently shushed him. In less than a minute, the tents were all packed. Hesan spied a narrow valley where they could hide from the Spanish. The place seemed strangely familiar to him, but there was no time to think of why. Presently Knojes joined them, whispering the words that none of them had wanted to hear: the Spanish battalion was indeed coming their way. Scrambling into the gulch, the companions sat tight for a long wait.

For several long minutes, silence reigned. Nothing could be heard except for shallow breaths and the occasional shifting of limbs or weapons.

Then, the first footfalls of the marching soldiers reached the small native group's ears. Along with it came the clip-clop of horses, the creaking of the cannon they carried, and the grumbling men. The sound gradually got louder and louder.

The hope that they would not be discovered slowly evaporated into the air of the narrow ravine. Hesan caught his brother's glance and gave him a weak smile. He made eye contact with Pedro and nodded his head sagely. As the first glimpse of the soldiers' helmets and muskets held at the ready, Hesan was fairly certain that their time had come. He looked into Valeria's deep yellow and green eyes, and then a plan slowly hatched in his mind.

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The village seemed so calm without the two vibrant sons of the chief. Mrs. Krinj braced herself again in the market, half-expecting Lejo to come charging through, and she started to put down her bucket of water before she remembered that he and his brother were gone. Reaching over, she patted the cat's head reassuringly.

Even the barracks activity level was lower than usual.

All the men were either taking a siesta or chatting among themselves about fighting styles, the inevitable battle, and how they expected to fair in it.

Sinaj sighed to herself and finished the laundry.

Hanging Lejo's undergarments to dry, she was reminded again of how much she already missed her sons. Oddly, at that instant, she felt that in one way or another, Hesan and Lejo were in trouble. And not just mischief, but serious trouble. Now worried, Sinaj went to find her husband.

She checked all the usual places: the couch, the village square, with Nustije and Oranos, who told her they had not seen Estevan all morning, and finally the barracks to find only that he was in none of those places. Asking around, she at last learned that the chief had left on a short trip to a neighboring village to see what news had arrived from Murixcanaoy because Knojes—the normal messenger—was obviously not available to relay information back and forth since he was escorting Pedro and her boys to the capital.

At last, Sinaj went to the humble cottage of Dovan and his family. Knocking gently on the door, it opened to let her in.

Greeting her inside was Dovan's wife, Tawyan. "You look perfectly wonderful, today, Lady Sinaj. Taya is having her nap right now, so I'm trying to stay quiet. Would you like to hold little Divan? He reminds me so much of his daddy." They

both smothered the baby with kisses and peeked in at eighteen-month-old Taya sleeping peacefully in her crib.

After a few more minutes of small talk, Tawyan asked the chief's wife, "Now, what did you want to see me for?"

In a few sentences, Sinaj explained her mother's instincts regarding Hesan and Lejo. "For some reason, I have this sensation like they're in real danger. Could you pray with me for them? It would make me feel so much better."

"Of course, my lady." Tawyan took Sinaj's hands in her own and asked Aelyon to protect Hesan, Lejo, Dovan, and their friends. By the time they were finished, Sinaj looked very relieved and smiled at her childhood playmate.

"See you later, and thanks so much!" Sinaj called. She handed over Divan, who had been a veritable angel the entire time.

"Any time you need it!" Tawyan replied, as she waved goodbye and the baby cooed. The door shut, and Sinaj sighed again, but this time with relief. She knew that whatever was happening to her boys, Aelyon was in control of it all.

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"Man, it's hard to keep these men under control,"

Sanchez muttered to himself. "Those Mayans must be deaf and blind not to see or hear us coming!"

He had watched them pack up their camp more quickly than any Spaniard had ever done. He had watched them run into the gully, as if they could hide from him.

Now, he was still watching with amazement at their stupidity for staying inside. Those foolish natives had long missed their chance to spring out and run from pursuit.

Now, they were trapped like rats.

"Get closer and don't bother staying quiet. We've got 'em now!" el Caballero Oscuro crowed. "Make sure they can't escape. Cut off the other side."

Yelling into the ravine, he taunted the natives,

"There's nothing you can do now except come out with your hands in the air. I'm sure that Cortez would treat you real nice. Maybe he will let you starve to death instead of torturing you. Ha, ha, ha! You are all going to die."

Nothing happened. He expected them to come out, weeping, or maybe even commit suicide right then and there. But none of these occurred. "Perhaps you think you can make a rush and fight your way out. You'd better come up with a better plan because you'd rush headlong into a storm of Spanish musket shells. We have you surrounded.

If you surrender easily, I might put in a good word for you with *el comandante*."

He saw out of the corner of his eye one of his men frantically waving his arms and pointing to something behind him. "Don't be stupid, man, the savages are all in there!" Those were the last words that he could speak for a while.

Screeching roars echoed throughout the small canyon, as a monster, then another, and then many more circled the Spaniards. Shouts of the men and nervous whinnies of the horses rang out as the monsters made short work of any resistance. One looked right at Sanchez and stalked straight to him. It looked familiar in some strange way.

At first, Sanchez tried to pull out his sword on the creature, but in a smooth, almost impossibly fast motion, his sword arm was grasped firmly and painfully in the monster's mighty jaws. Around him, his comrades were disarmed in similar fashion. Another creature emitted a snarl as a conquistador tried to fend it off with the muzzle of his musket.

The snarl jogged Sanchez's memory, and suddenly he remembered the other day, when tu Madre had been attacked by the same type of creature. It was the very one holding his arm, he decided, although that made no logical sense unless the same native boy was here, too...

"Tu Madre? Sir Pedro? Are you in there? It's me, el Caballero Oscuro!" Sanchez knew that the chances were slim, but in the Americas, anything could happen.

A familiarly incredulous voice called out from in the ravine. "Is that really you, Sanchez? 'Cause if it is, I'm going to wring your scrawny little neck off!" Hustling up the dirt canyon wall, Pedro José Eduardo San Xavier lunged for Sanchez.

For an instant, el Caballero Oscuro forgot about the little attachment his arm had gotten into but was readily reminded as the monster chomped down on it anew. "You can choke me to death later, but first call off your dragon thing!" he moaned.

Following Pedro up the side of the gully was the same Mayan boy as last time, except he looked much older up close. With a foreign word, he commanded the creature to release Sanchez, which it grudgingly did, while still eyeing him as if he were a dust mite.

Then, without warning, Pedro grabbed Sanchez's helmet, wrenched it off, and got his head right in the crook of his elbow, vigorously rubbing his knuckles deep into the unfortunate comrade's unprotected scalp.

Howling hideously more in exasperation than in pain, Sanchez was helpless to wriggle out of the senior officer's iron grip. After another half a minute of excruciating mortification, he was released from an unyielding hold for the second time in less than a day.

Sanchez griped in self-pity and put his helmet back on his tousled hair. Resentfully, he stared at Pedro and shouted, "What was that for? I mean, it's not like I hurt you, right?" At a menacing glare from the irate Spaniard, he repeated himself. "Right?"

For a moment, it seemed as though Pedro would keep his promise and strangle Sanchez after all. But then, he simply shook his head, shrugging. "For the love of everything sacred, Sanchez, why did you just abandon me without a look back? And then this, threatening the lives of these very fine native men?" He gestured at the line of Mayans, who had all come to stand in the open before him, next to the Mayan dragon-keeper, whose name he remembered was Hesan.

Sanchez looked askance at his former captain. "What do you take me for, then? A coward?" he yelled. "How do I know you're still loyal to Cortez? After spending so much time with the natives, they might have turned you against us! In fact, why would you be defending them?!"

Lowering his tone of voice so that only Sanchez could hear, Pedro whispered, "Unless I'm mistaken, you probably aren't in good graces with Cortez yourself."

Sanchez gulped, and Pedro continued. "I suggest you make a reasonable assumption. Joining up with my group would probably be healthier for you than returning empty-handed to Cortez. Am I right?"

Sanchez gulped again, louder this time.

"Can you see where I'm going with this?"

Sanchez squeaked, "Yeah, but what do you want?"

Pedro answered, "Your soldiers."

At first, Sanchez was put out. "What are you talking about? You must be joking! Cortez put me in charge of this expedition, and I'm, and we're, well, maybe..." his voice sputtered to a stop as he looked into the ferocious gaze of the boy's creature.

"...Of course, I will! Here, take command right now. Attention, company! Authority is switched back to Capitán Pedro."

Tu Madre breathed in the air of power, then let it back out again with the humility he had learned. Gazing out at the Spanish brigade, he realized what he could do to save the Mayan people. Staring back at him, Hesan nodded encouragingly, and Lejo gave him a thumb's up.

Rubbing his hands together, Pedro summoned all of the eloquence he possessed. "People, we have on our hands a war. In it, more natives will die than Spaniards. But that doesn't mean you can have the guarantee that you'll all come out in one piece. If you go back to Cortez, you are already in hot water because you wasted an expedition with no profit at all. And then, if you're still alive and well enough to take place in the fighting at the Mayan capital city, there's a definite chance that you'll die anyway.

"I offer to you a plan that, if conducted properly, will see you all safely back to Spain. But most importantly, before we begin, I have to know that you're all with me in this." Stepping over to his party's side of the valley, he urged them, "If any of you wishes victory, then stand with me and the natives over here on my side of the ravine. But if someone doesn't want any part of it, then stay where you are, and I give you my word that I will let you go back to Cortez safely." At first, nobody moved.

Then, a trickle of soldiers began to march or lead their horses towards Pedro. A few more, and a few there, and soon at least a third of the battalion had crossed over to join him. A murmur rose as the remaining Spaniards conversed among themselves. At length, the majority of the remnant came to Pedro's side. The only soldiers left seemed almost wanting to unite with their fellows, but would rather return to Cortez.

"Okay, let me make this clear for you guys," Pedro reminded them. "Stay here, or get executed by Cortez!" At that, the few soldiers who were leaving performed a snappy "to-the-rear-march" and got right back in line.

Pedro's desire to help the natives had become more than an obligation. He somehow felt that Cortez was evil, and should not be allowed to conquer a peaceful civilization with all the bloodshed that he would surely use to vanquish it.

However, he now had a task at hand. Finally, the realization hit, and he remembered that he was in charge of an entire squad of Spanish soldiers. More importantly, eighty armed soldiers who could greatly turn the tide of the war.

"Conquistadors, lead the way, heading south by southwest! Pikemen follow, and musketeers next. Cannons, bring up the rear. We've got a kingdom to save!

Sanchez will tell all you guys about it later when you break for camp.” As a second thought, he asked Sanchez to come to his side. “Hey, Caballero Oscuro! I need you to take these insurrectionists to the Mayan capital of Murixcanaoy.

Think you can handle that? You will have the, ahem, compelling advice of Sir Knojes, so it should go fine.”

Sanchez was tongue-tied. “Wha—what? I—I uh, well...yeah! Sure, I can do it!”

Tu Madre gave him a look. “I’m very glad to hear that I can count on you. Until next time...” He tipped his conquistador’s hat to his comrade and then called to the troupe. “Company! Command is turned back over to el Caballero Oscuro!” With the Spanish soldiers all set and moving, he turned to his Mayan friends. “How did I do, Sir Knojes?”

Knojes acknowledged him with a respectful smile.

“Nicely handled, Sir Pedro. How can I help you now?”

Even though he was happy to be approved by the tough warrior, Pedro just winked and called Hesan over to him.

Hesan listened carefully as the Spaniard whispered into his ear, and the longer he whispered, the wider the young man’s mischievous grin grew. Without warning, he gave a nod and ran back to the ravine, dragging his younger brother with him.

“So, what’s going on, capitán? And what was Hesan smiling at?” Pedro only laughed and spoke to Dovan so that the royal messenger could not hear their conversation.

Dovan gave out the occasional “hmm” and “m-hmm” but gave no clue as to what they were discussing.

Now beginning to get irate, Knojes demanded, “Sir Pedro, would you please mind giving a care about your superior? I am genuinely interested in your plan.” For a second, it seemed as though the Spanish captain would continue to ignore his captor.

Then, he made a request. “For my plan to work better, I will bring Hesan, Lejo, and Archer Dovan with me on a separate route. Sir Knojes, I would prefer you and your eagle warriors to help el Caballero Oscuro lead those Spaniards to the capital and tell your king that they are happy to fight for you. Also, may I ask a favor of you?”

Quite honestly, Knojes almost said yes instantly. Then, his instinctive wariness kicked in before the word leaped from his mouth. Thinking carefully, he considered what sort of favor the Spaniard might desire. *Maybe he will ask for his freedom, Knojes thought. I would be happy to give him at least that after what he just did for the Mayan people.* “Sir Pedro, it would be my pleasure to grant you a wish.”

Earnestly looking the Mayan officer in the eye, Pedro let fly. “Would you consider giving me your genuine, hard-earned respect? I know I haven’t been giving that to you very much, but would you forgive me and think of me as a loyal brother instead of constantly watching for me to stab you in the back?”

Caught off guard, Knojes was surprised by Pedro’s appeal. “Well, if that’s all you want, then sure! And I guess you have been fairly trustworthy while under my supervision, so why not? By the way, did you want to be freed from your status as a captive before you kidnap Hesan, Lejo, and Archer Dovan?”

Not having thought of his proposed expedition as a kidnapping, Pedro was taken aback. “What? I—I mean, whoa! Where did that come from?” Before the Mayan messenger could reply, the Spaniard realized how he, still being a prisoner of war, could not very well run off with a few natives because it really would seem like a kidnapping.

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of it that way before, but I guess you’re right. Sorry, I got a little carried away there, from all that ordering the battalion around like the old days. I mean, before Hesan captured me...by the queen’s beard, was it really only a few days ago?” Lost in thought, Pedro trickled to a stop.

After a moment of silence, Hesan and Lejo ran to the two post-conversationists. “Are you guys going to stand there all day? C’mon, Sir Pedro, we’ve got to get a move on!” Hesan was obviously eager to begin the secret mission.

“Now, just a minute there, son. I’m still bonded to this royal courier. And until he releases me, it would be abducting for me to take you boys away with me. So it’s up to this man when we get to leave.” The boys waited a minute as Knojes held them in a bit of suspense.

Just then, Hesan had an inspiration. “Sir Knojes, I was just thinking, since I’m the one who caught Sir Pedro in the first place, it should be me who decides if he goes free or not. Isn’t that right?” He and the Spaniard exchanged a high-five.

After a grimace and a groan of frustration, Knojes consented. “Hesan does have a point, there. I sure hadn’t thought of that. Because he did originally capture Sir Pedro, the decision is up to him. Well, Hesan, what will you do with your prisoner? Remember, he was an enemy of our people.”

Rubbing his hands together and chuckling evilly, Hesan looked fully inclined to sentence the Spaniard to imprisonment forever. But with a last laugh to himself, Hesan confirmed none of that inclination. “Capitán Pedro José Eduardo San Xavier, I do hereby liberate you from your involuntary confinement under the authority of the honorable Messenger Knojes.”

Now that the whole escapade was over and done, Pedro had a few questions for Hesan. “Back in that ravine, I thought we all were goners. How did all those jaguars get there?”

Grinning widely, Hesan replied, “I was hoping you’d ask. I thought I recognized that ravine we were hiding in, but in the excitement, I couldn’t put my finger on it until later when I was telling Valeria goodbye. Suddenly, it all clicked into place, and I realized that this was near the cave that I found Valeria’s family.

“So I made excellent use of the training I had given her all her life and gave her instructions to round up her family, which luckily for all of us she understood. It turns out that Aelyon was looking out for us, and Valeria got a whole pack of jaguars. I guess when she saw all those Spaniards threatening us, she sounded the alarm and all the jaguars attacked them.”

In astonishment, Pedro could only shake his head.

When he finally found his voice, it came out with disbelieving awe. “I sure find that pretty hard to believe. I guess either you’re crazy, or this is just another reason to trust in your God.”

He looked out into the ravine and saw Valeria giving her thanks to her fellow jaguars. He was amazed at the apparent intelligence of not only Hesan’s jaguar but all of them. They were all lined up in front of Valeria and another older

jaguar—possibly her mother. They each took turns nuzzling her neck in farewell, and she returned the fond gesture with a thankful lick.

In the distance, the sun was slowing lowering below the horizon, and the dirty brown dust clouds towards the northeast, kicked up by the departing army, contrasted with the painted, puffy clouds in the west above the setting sun.

The blue skies were gradually replaced by hues of purple and red. Pedro silently gave thanks to the person responsible for it all.

Chapter VII

On the Road Again.

Estevan was disappointed. Actually, this whole trip seemed like one big chain of disappointments after another. To start, he had still not felt right about sending Hesan on his adventure with the Spaniard—much less letting Lejo come along for the ride. Yes, he agreed with his wife. She was not one to make rash or foolish decisions, so he trusted her judgment. He had done some serious praying for their safety, especially the previous afternoon. It only deepened his feeling that he never should have allowed his boys to accompany them.

And to make it worse, he could not even travel to get news of his boys without a mishap occurring. His horse was feeling moody and had not wanted anyone to ride it.

Finally, following three bruising bouts of bucking, the chief had managed to mount his steed. The road was not much better. He had given up counting the potholes in which his horse stepped, losing count at thirty-eight.

To top it all, Estevan had plodded into the neighboring town, and his disheveled appearance had caused the elders in charge to see him as a fugitive from the Aztecs, and they shut him out of their village. Only after a long discussion with the gatekeeper did Chief Estevan convince the townsfolk that he was who he said he was, and by then it was time for the evening meal.

Though he was impatient to learn of news from the capital, Estevan knew that Mayans never talked while eating. So, he ate as fast as he could, hoping that his haste would alert the elders to his hurry.

It didn't. Instead, he got nothing but a stomachache from eating too quickly. Consequently, he was detained in the local infirmary, tended by an old, grandmotherly woman by the name of Reynad who insisted that even though it was an honor for her to doctor him, he must stay in bed.

Thus he had passed almost the entire day, completely at the mercy of this frail, but still venerable lady—staring down a plate of leafy looking weeds and hearing her say,

“Eat this.” Reynad pushing another odd concoction toward him and commanding him to “Drink this. It will help you recover.” Estevan unflinchingly replying, “Lady Reynad, this looks like something to feed my livestock with! You

must be joking.” And then gagging down the pile of vegetation, much to the satisfaction of Reynad, and often to his own disgust and discomfort.

Normally, Estevan was a very positive man, if not always as patient as his oldest son. However, this had gone too far. “Lady Reynad, I feel perfectly fine, and I demand that you release me to whatever unfortunate health awaits me. I don’t care at all about a little upset stomach, and I am going to speak with the elders of this village right now!”

He had expected at least some objection from the old lady, but Reynad only excused him regretfully. “Chief Estevan, you may go. But before you do, just let me say that you have stayed under my care for the longest of any. Thank you, so much.”

Estevan did not know how to reply. This was obviously a sign that he was not the only one who had been disgusted and disgruntled by the nurse’s care.

However, instead of feeling glad that others held his own opinion, an unexpected emotion of sympathy washed over him. “Ma’am, I can’t honestly say that I enjoyed your doctoring.”

The old woman’s sadness deepened.

“But,” Estevan added quickly, “I can say that I appreciate all the trouble you went to, and I especially thank you for all your patience with me.”

At this, the nurse’s face perked up, and she regained her tender look and a bit of mischief, also. “I do say, Chief Estevan, this does come as somewhat of a surprise. However, there is one last thing that all under my care must go through before they leave.”

Estevan was horrified.

“...You must sign my guestbook!” She burst into maniacal laughter before giving the incredulous Mayan village leader a knowing wink. “Go! You are well, and I have no need to keep you any longer from your important mission that I know you are on. May good fortune follow you!” Estevan exited the infirmary, waving back at Reynad.

He could not help but wonder why the woman had behaved so strangely. He knew that his condition did not require such strange and vigorous treatment. Yet, for some reason, the nurse had seen fit to detain him for 24 hours.

Estevan began to question Reynad’s motives, nagging doubts wiggled in the back of his mind, but he pushed them aside and forced himself to observe his surroundings.

The sun was going down, its rays engulfing the land in a multihued barrage of deep crimson, vermillion, golden, and orange. In the sky, the darkening clouds were soaked in a profound violet. The faint, slivered moon materialized from behind them, joining the evening star to herald the end of the day. A beautiful way to end a miserable day, Estevan thought. Yet, he had little remorse as he walked through the small village.

As he approached the gate, a nearby hut door, tinged with the scarlet evening, let out an elder who called to Estevan, “My goodness, Chief Estevan, is that you? My goodness, but are you leaving so soon when I had hoped to talk with you a bit? I did hear a bit of strange nonsense about some Aztecan refugee impersonating you, but it couldn’t have had a bit of truth. My goodness, would you like to sit down a bit for a bit of tea? Please, my goodness, you look more than a bit tired and

much more than a bit hungry, so please don't hesitate for a bit to come in for a bit to have a bite to eat. My goodness, what a lovely bit of sunshine this is. I only wish a little bit that I could've been outside for a bit, this fine bit of an evening. Have you heard any bit of news regarding the Spanish army? My goodness, but I have a bit of gossip about that."

This elder talked so fast that Estevan could not hope to get in a word edgewise. In fact, he was not even able to understand most of what this man was saying. The only phrases that he could discern were "my goodness" and "a bit." Then, the last sentence to tumble out of the elder's mouth caught Estevan's attention. Holding up his hands, he feebly tried to quiet the jabbering man. "Wait, wait. Did you say something about the Spanish?" The tumultuous flood of words finally slowed enough to account for the statement.

"The Spanish? My goodness, why didn't you just say that bit? Yes, I know a bit about them, but it can wait a bit for you to rest in my house for a little bit, for a tidbit of food." Estevan reminded himself not to make the same mistake he did as the guest of the previous meal and patiently followed after the elder into the hut.

The interior was dark and smelled different from the other huts, but Estevan did not have enough time to place the smell. Two dark shadows loomed in front of him, and before he could even flinch, they shoved a large, rough sack over his head.

He struggled and tussled with the two captors, but even after placing a few kicks and punches to his assailants, one took out a knife and brought the handle down onto his head with brutal force. After a brilliant light flashed throughout all his consciousness, blackness overwhelmed him.

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"Are we there yet?" Lejo's whiney complaining had almost not stopped ever since they had left ten hours ago.

Hesan winked at Pedro and neatly tripped Lejo, sending him sprawling in the dirt.

"Hey! What was that for?" Lejo yelled indignantly.

"What do you think?" Hesan answered irritably.

"You've been crabby this entire time! Would you prefer to walk home?" No answer was necessary. Somewhat deflated, Lejo turned his attention back to putting one foot in front of the other. Dovan strode on resolutely and was now almost thirty yards ahead of the other three. Even the resilient Valeria seemed unaccustomed to this kind of exercise.

Without even looking back at the others, Dovan finally called a halt. "Shall we stop for a little while?"

Receiving no answer, Dovan finally turned and saw his comrades almost fifty paces behind him. "Hey, there! Why didn't you say anything to let me know you were that far behind? You might have gotten lost or something, and I wouldn't have even known!"

He almost continued to scold them, but then he noticed their sullen faces. "What's wrong?"

Lejo had a few words on the tip of his tongue, but then his face turned puzzled and he did not say anything.

Hesan answered instead. “Well, Archer Dovan, Lejo has been complaining this whole trip! It’s really gotten on my and Sir Pedro’s nerves. So I finally just tripped him, and now I feel just rotten. Not just guilty, but almost like there’s something actually on my chest.”

Dovan expressed thoughtfulness. “Now that you mention it, I’ve been feeling the same way. I can’t seem to cheer up.” His words faded into the quiet solemnity.

Valeria glanced in different directions. Lejo dug a hole in the dust with his toe. Hesan stuck Haeldar’s staff into the ground and proceeded to twist it in deeper in between his palms. Pedro sighed heavily and finally broke the silence.

“I don’t know about you guys, and I know that I only learned about your God a short week ago. But there’s something in my gut—in my very being—that’s telling me something is wrong. And it makes me wonder if He might be trying to say something.”

As what Pedro was explaining slowly dawned on the group, Hesan’s countenance registered uncomfortable shock. “You know what? I agree with you. And what’s more, I may have finally put my finger on it. Someone we know is in trouble. Not only that, but I believe I know who that someone is.”

Before Dovan could object, Lejo affirmed this. “You know, Hesan? I don’t like to admit it, but I think you’re right. I think that Aelyon is putting that someone on my heart. Let’s ask for his protection. Like, right this instant.”

Here Dovan had to say something. “Yes, it’s always good to pray. But who is this someone you keep referring to?”

Lejo and Hesan chorused simultaneously, “Father!”

And as soon as each person heard, they too realized how true this statement was.

Without further ado, they all sank to their knees and clasped hands. Divine intervention was not something any of them often pondered, but there was no doubt that they knew how to pray for it now that the need arose.

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He regained consciousness with the intense aroma of onions in his nostrils. As a matter of fact, the smell was almost strong enough to make him swoon. The feeling of light-headedness gradually ebbed away and was immediately replaced by a throbbing headache. He felt a hot, wet stickiness on the back of his head which he instantly knew to be blood. Slowly, painfully, he opened his eyelids. Or at least he thought he did. The view appeared no lighter than what he could see with closed eyes.

Forced to work without sight, Estevan went through the mental checklist of physical state from bottom to top.

Toes, check. Legs, aching but functional. Abdomen, bruised. Heart, still beating. Arms, sore. Finally, he examined the wound on his head gingerly with his fingertips. It could be serious, but he knew that head wounds always bleed more than they should.

Then he focused on listening to his surroundings. The rucksack in which he was tied muffled the sound very little.

However, there was not much for his ears to hear. The only thing they could detect was a constant clopping sound he figured to be hoof beats on one of the

only roads in Central America at the time. From that he was able to deduce that since he had been on one of these roads earlier the day of his capture, they were probably on that same road, since the next closest road was several hundred miles away.

Now and then he heard a chicken clucking or a pig grunting, which led him to believe that he was being smuggled on a farmer's cart. Now that he had gathered as much from his senses as he could, he put his brain to the task of getting out of danger.

Questions flitted about his mind like disturbed bats in a cave. Why did Mr. "A Bit" ask him to enter a hut and then allow some thugs to capture him? Did the elder have something against him personally? He instantly ruled that one out because Estevan had not known the guy for more than a minute before they caught him. So if Mr. A Bit had nothing against him, then why did he have him kidnapped?

Was the elder being hired to take him out? How much longer did Estevan have to live?

This question unnerved him and heightened his sense of urgency to the point that he almost could not stay self-controlled. The instinct to cry for help nearly overwhelmed him until he took a deep, onion-filled breath, and the sharpness of the scent brought tears to his eyes and cleared his head.

He tentatively wiggled his body to find how tightly he was bound. To his surprise, the ropes tying his wrists together were loose. Making sure his actions were unnoticed, he pulled off his bonds with his teeth. Working in the darkness of his onion sack, he slowly teased away the tension fastening his ankles together.

Just as he was about to remove the ropes binding his ankles, he began to hear additional traces of noise: people talking in several different languages, cattle mooing, street vendors hocking their wares, and faraway minstrels plucking the strings of their diverse instruments. The music struck a chord in his memory. Sinaj holding Lejo...

Little Hesan bouncing up and down in excitement, giggling in delight. The orchestra piece reverberating through the auditorium. Hesan immediately quieting down to listen to it. The offering of music reaching the heavens.

Then finally the climax of sound, dwindling away until nothing could be heard. After the spellbound silence, the crowd exploding into applause, deafening all ears and canceling any conversation. Estevan picking Hesan up, lifting him onto his shoulders, and carrying him back to the convoy. The boy asking him, "Father, can we come back next week?"

And Estevan replying, "No, son, the music only happens every ten years. But when you're seventeen years old, then we'll return, I promise."

Unbidden tears sprang to Estevan's eyes as he remembered that today was the ten-year mark from that very day. The music he was listening to now was in fact the very orchestra that Hesan had so badly wanted to hear.

Now, Estevan realized just how much Hesan had sacrificed to go on his journey: his childhood dream of going to this concert. Not only that, but at his father's own bidding.

Before Estevan could feel more sorry for his son, his reverie was interrupted by a much closer sound. "You moron! We just passed my house back there." The

driver of the cart responded to his comrade's comment with a much fouler expletive and then backed the wagon. Then the driver and the other man hopped out of the wagon and picked up the onion sack, with Estevan still inside it.

Hurriedly, Estevan loosely retied his ropes to discourage any detection of his newfound freedom.

Grunting and grumbling violently with the effort, the two captors slowly made their way along an unkempt stable and into a hut. Once inside, they dumped him unceremoniously on the ground. "When do you suppose he'll get here?" The first one asked. "It's nearly lunchtime."

Estevan's stomach growled as he remembered how long it had been since his last appreciable meal. Reynad's meals didn't count.

The driver answered the first guy, "You dumb son of a cactus! We're to keep the dog here for tomorrow, Galeron!"

"Dog?"

"The prisoner, blockhead!"

"Oh. And Ulzaq, what'll we do with him for now?"

Ulzaq's answer was not very encouraging for Estevan.

"Just leave him in the sack. It doesn't matter what shape he's in when the boss picks him up." He chuckled menacingly, and Estevan made a priority mental note to get out of there as soon as possible for the sake of his health.

"Woman! We're hungry. Give us something to eat, right now," Galeron ordered. His wife hastily entered the room. "Get moving, wife! And Chelar, you too, lazy brat! You'd better start preparing lunch for me, my comrade, and a guest." Just as quickly as she had entered, the man's wife rushed out the door, calling for her daughter's assistance as she went. After watching her go, Galeron looked back at the onion sack lying on the ground.

"Have you heard this guy say anything at all?" he asked. Ulzaq shook his head slowly. "Do you think he's regained consciousness yet? I didn't think you hit him that hard."

Ulzaq walked over to the rucksack. Bending over it, he chuckled again. "Heh, heh. There's only one way to find out."

Estevan had no warning to prepare for the vicious kick to the side of the bag, where his sore leg happened to be. He barely kept the sharp cry from exiting his lips.

"Did you hear anything?"

Galeron said nothing.

Ulzaq hesitated and then added what he probably thought was an encouraging thought. "Well, it doesn't matter if he's awake or not. This guy's not going nowhere." He grabbed the opening of the sack and shouted into it. "YOU HEAR THAT?! YOU'RE NOT GOING NOWHERES!" After the ringing in his ears went away, Estevan's headache returned. He moaned quietly before he could help himself.

"Aha! You are awake!" Ulzaq crowed exultantly.

"What should we do with him, Galeron?" He looked at his accomplice with a fiendish gleam in his eyes.

Galeron glowered in silence at his fellow thug and then finally answered, “Nothing! What’s up with you and your obsession with pain? Can’t you just leave someone alone for a chance? No, don’t touch him. C’mon, let’s eat some lunch.”

Ulzaq’s face registered surprise and doubt before he finally took one last, long look at his captive. Galerón watched him carefully as he headed for the kitchen.

Then he strode to the hurting Estevan and whispered hoarsely, “Don’t worry. Our boss wants you alive. Cooperate, and things might go easier for you. But my sadistic buddy will take any excuse to hurt you. Don’t give him that excuse, ’cause I won’t be able to protect you again.”

Estevan was amazed at this unexpected stroke of luck.

“Thanks,” was all he managed to mumble before Galerón left him alone with his thoughts and his sack of onions.

Chapter VIII

Destruction is Rampant.

„Oh, great. What am I supposed to do now?” el Caballero Oscuro groaned. He and the remnant of his “dragon-slaying” party were coming within view of Murixcanaoy a few miles off and the ramifications of a Spanish army knocking at the door of a Mayan capital were just now manifesting themselves in Sanchez’s mind. *Hmm*, he mused. *The Spanish have just sacked Tenochtitlan, the Mayans have feared a Spanish approach, and here we are trying to be peacefully let in. This is like an accident waiting to happen.* “So, you Knojes person there, what do we do now? I must admit, I’m stumped.”

Knojes had probably thought the matter over, too, but he was not about to give up his ideas so easily. His mistrust of Spaniards in general had hardly diminished at all, even after meeting Pedro. “Come now, my Spanish friend, haven’t you thought of a way to get inside without panicking the entire population into total chaos and mayhem?”

Sanchez did not appreciate Knojes’s humor. “Look, Sir Knojes—there, I called you ‘sir’—I can’t help you guys unless I get inside this place and talk to your queso grande.”

Knojes gave the Spaniard a questioning stare. “My what? I do not understand. What is the big cheese? Are you asking for some food?”

Almost completely fed up, Sanchez threw his hands into the air with a dramatic flair and looked skyward.

“Never mind. All I’m asking you to do is get me and my men inside of that hornet’s nest safely, and I will be forever indebted to you.” The extent of the pledge that Sanchez made was not lost on Knojes for even a second.

Instantly transforming his attitude into a benign, almost helpful one, the Mayan messenger eagerly relayed his plan. “Let me knock on the gates, just me by myself, and then tell the guards who you and your Spanish bunch are. Once they know

what to expect, you could just march your squadron into the palace.” His glib smile drooped in response to Sanchez’s dry frown.

The Spaniard was not impressed. “Look, does it seem like we can just waltz in and have a nice cup of tea? Well, we can’t. It just won’t work that way. And that doesn’t count for my promise, either.”

Knojes did not accept Sanchez’s advice. “I don’t see the problem with my idea. Just stay there until I return. I’ll tell you if it’s safe to proceed. Do you understand?”

Sanchez had watched from the bottom of the pecking order for long enough to recognize stubbornness when he saw it, and Knojes right now weighed in at about 14.9 out of 10. Knowing better than to argue, he simply called after him, “Just don’t come crying back to me, all right?”

“There will not be a need!” he shouted back at Sanchez. Disgusted, Knojes turned his back to the Spanish regiment, squared his shoulders, and began the final leg of the journey to Murixcanaoy. In the two-and-a-half mile trek to follow, he put his brain to task, rehearsing the whole explanation that he would give to the gatekeepers.

How had he gotten mixed up in this mess, anyway?

Ah, yes—his royal mission to bring that Pedro fellow to the capital. Had the king really spoken to him only three days ago? Those seventy-two hours of his life seemed to have lasted longer than any others in his lifetime. Those three days had been filled with fatigue, excellent food, intense marching, terrifying hopelessness, enormous relief, and unbounded amazement.

Knojes continued to walk, letting his mind wander, until he was almost halfway to the capital. Then he was rudely awakened back to the present by the sound of approaching hoof beats and hurried conversation. “Are you all right?”

“Did they capture you?”

“Did you get away?”

“Do they know you escaped?”

“How did you manage it?”

“We’ve got to get you inside!”

“Yes, quickly!”

“Quickly, quickly!”

“Not a moment to lose!”

“Not a second to spare!”

“Not a minute to waste!”

“Not a—”

“Wait just a moment. What are you talking about?”

Who are you two?” Finally losing patience, Knojes interrupted their rapid-fire interrogation. “And before you answer, calm down, please. I can barely understand you at all.”

Exchanging a glance with each other, the twins—who were beginning to look more alike every second Knojes stared at them—took turns responding.

“Well, I’m Texur.”

“And I’m Ruxet.”

“We came to rescue you.”

“Because we saw you run away from the enemy.”

“And make your way over here.”

“So we thought that you could use some help.”

“Because you didn’t have a horse.”

“And the enemy does.”

“So we found you and—”

“Stop, stop!” Knojes cried out in exasperation. “Not another word out of you. I’m not trying to escape from anybody! I just was retrieving a prisoner.” But before he could explain himself, Texur and Ruxet were off again, this time faster than the speed of comprehension.

“I knew it, you’re—”

“You must’ve been—”

“Gosh, those Spaniards are—”

“Boy, you’ve got a—”

“Just hang on a—”

“We’ll get you out of—”

“Don’t even trouble yourself to—”

“Yeah, you won’t have to—”

“Here, hop on!” That last disgrace to human communication was accompanied by a motion, sweeping Knojes onto the horse closest to him. He was seated behind Texur—or was it Ruxet?—and before he could even blink, they had born him towards the main gate at a gallop. Unable to hear his passenger through the roaring wind, Texur (or Ruxet) was through the gate and in the stable before he stopped.

Quivering slightly from the exhilaration of the ride, Knojes turned on Texur and Ruxet and began to methodically, mercilessly beat them down with his words.

“All I needed was to talk with the king for just a moment.

That’s why I was coming. Just a single conversation was necessary. This is for the benefit of all the Mayan people, and yet I am cursed with the ill fortune of being hounded by a couple of absolute fools.”

Like a freight train, slowly building up momentum, he continued before the two could start again. “Sitting out there, waiting for my word, is a squadron of well-trained Spanish mercenaries waiting to help our people. But in my way are two complete, utter, and downright moronic”—here he let loose all of the raging indignation that he had held back with a single, deafening word—“IMBECILES!”

Knojes chugged to a stop. With a heaving chest, he panted, “Sorry about that. I got angry and I shouldn’t have.

Will you forgive me?” After recuperating from the fetal position, Texur and Ruxet were quick to make up any hard feelings—very quick, in fact.

“Why, sure.”

“Don’t even mention it.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“You had every right to be mad.”

“Just don’t get mad at us again.”

“Yeah, if the Spanish had a thousand conquistadors on their side—”

“And the Mayans had you on their side—”

“Those poor Spaniards would hardly have a chance.”

“They’d be finished.”

“They’d be done for.”

“They’d be out of commission.”

“They’d be—” When they saw that Knojes was about to open his mouth again, they hurriedly clamped their own mouths shut.

Finally able to get a decent word in edgewise, Knojes spoke with obvious relief. “Thank you. Now, I would appreciate it if my companions and I could have safe passage through the capital to the palace.”

After looking each other in the eye, Texur and Ruxet gave a long, understanding, “Ohhh! You should’ve said so right at the start.” Knojes chose to ignore the fact that they would not have heard him even if he had. They were about to continue, but Texur and Ruxet were completely interrupted by a series of shouts and alarms.

Running to the three men, a young Mayan teenager passed on the message that all able-bodied men were expected to report to the main gate. When asked why, he only mentioned something about Spaniards under his breath. With a plummeting sensation in his gut, Knojes shouted after the boy to explain what he meant, but he had hurried around the corner.

A messenger himself by trade, Knojes swiftly mounted a fresh horse and hastened to the main gate. He asked the closest leader what the commotion was, but was brushed aside with a gruff reply. “Figure it out yourself. Look out on the horizon!”

Following the direction of the busy leader’s hurried hand gesture, Knojes was mortified to spot what had stirred the whole capital into turmoil: Sanchez had brought the whole squad of Spanish soldiers to within view of Murixcanaoy. *Just like a stupid Spaniard*, Knojes thought to himself bitterly.

Now he had to somehow explain to either the leaders or even the king himself that the party of Spaniards was not bent on taking over the palace, but actually was volunteering to help the Mayans defeat Cortez. Knojes had no idea whatsoever how he could accomplish this, but after a short prayer, and a deep breath, he rode back into the heart of the city.

• • • • •

After they had all said something along the lines of “please give Estevan courage and strength and protect him from those who would do him harm,” the companions stood up.

Lejo sighed, “Man, does that feel better.” His statement brought nods of agreement from the others.

“You can say that again,” Hesan agreed.

Pedro nodded his head, and changed the subject to a more pressing issue. “I believe that we’re getting close to where I expect the main Spanish battalion is. All of us need to keep a sharp lookout for the first sight of them.

Remember, our presence has to remain undiscovered if my plan is to work at all. Hesan and Lejo, why don’t you work together to help put up the shelter for tonight. Archer Dovan and I have some finer details to work out.”

As Dovan and Pedro put their heads together, the brothers looked at each other. “You do it!” they both said at the same time.

Hesan immediately said, "There's no way either one of us are doing this all by himself. You're going to help me whether you like or not. Now go find a good spot for the tent."

Hesan worked on untangling the gnarled mess of ropes while Lejo ambled around the campsite. Whenever Hesan looked up, Lejo would strut importantly.

What does Lejo think he's doing? Hesan thought to himself. *These knots are almost impossible to untie. There's a nice spot for the tent right over there! This loop comes out here like this, and that end is connected to that loop. Him and his lazy butt—he's just trying to get out of doing any work. How am I supposed to get this tiny stick to hold up the entire tent? Fine, I'll do it all by myself.*

Oh, that stick fits into that part of the canvas, and this rope here ties around the other end...wait a minute, didn't I just say that I wouldn't do this by myself? C'mon, you stupid, wooden piece of junk, go in! No one can depend on Lejo to do anything. There, I got it.

Now, what next? Aha, those three go like this, and then that piece of rope ties them together, so by holding them up, I can get the sheet on that part there. Now I just need to pull that over the top of it, and then, presto!

Hesan lifted the sheet high over his head and stretched with his whole body to reach the very top and center of the shelter, where three wooden poles intersected in a teepee-like fashion. First standing flatfooted, he now went on tiptoe, but was still just inches from the desired spot.

Grunting with the effort, he extended his arms and legs, and even tried extending his back to get another precious inch. His hands shook with the strain, and he reached, until finally the enormous tension that the whole assembly contained was released with a sudden push.

Pedro and Dovan looked over just in time to see Hesan collapsing face forward onto the entire shelter, with Lejo frozen in place behind him with his hand outstretched. Within seconds, it was over, and ten minutes of Hesan's life were wasted. The resulting calamitous configuration of chaotic canvas, wood, and Hesan was sprawled over the ground. Pedro and Dovan could only stare in sympathetic sorrow, and Lejo in shock.

Emerging dejectedly from the heart of the catastrophe, the victim crawled clear of the wreckage. Hesan, though unhurt, took one look at Lejo and was overwhelmed with an undeniable sense of unfairness. He yielded to the past few days of uncertainty, fatigue, and homesickness and curled up into a quivering ball. He pounded the ground with clenched fists and let loose a loud bellow of hopeless aggravation.

After a few moments of silence, Pedro slowly advanced until the shaking shoulder was in reach of his hand. Softly, he called, "Hesan? Are you okay?" Though no response was verbally received, Pedro knew instinctively that the young man was not all right. Sir Pedro José Eduardo San Xavier—Spanish captain, soldier, and leader—comforted his former captor. Dovan glared at Lejo, disappointed, and joined them.

After a few moments, Hesan wiped his sleeve across his face and stood. "Thanks, I think I'm feeling better now."

Lejo tried to apologize, but Hesan interrupted without even listening. “Lejo, I don’t want to so much as see you right now. You go put up the tent.” He turned his back to them and started walking.

Dovan asked quietly, “Where are you headed, Hesan?”

Without turning, Hesan thought for a second and then muttered, “I’m going to start a fire. At least then Lejo won’t be able to do anything worse than push me into a raging pile of flames.”

Now indignant, Lejo shouted after him, “Yeah! Guess you better watch yourself, or you’ll get burnt!” Seeing Pedro and Dovan turn to him, he added, “What are you all looking at?” Then he walked off in the opposite direction.

This time, Pedro said, “It’s getting dark, Lejo. Where are you going?”

Lejo stopped. “Uhhh...to get some water?”

From over by the newly-made fire pit, Hesan ordered Lejo presumptuously, “Take Val with you.”

Lejo left the campsite, grumbling, “I hate your dumb cat.”

Valeria snarled softly at him and followed.

• • • • •

That night, after dinner, Pedro addressed the others.

“Because we’re camping so close to the Spanish army, we need to set up a night watch while we sleep. So, Dovan will take the first watch, Hesan the second, Lejo the third, and I’ll take the last one. The most important thing to remember is also the most obvious: don’t fall asleep on your watch.”

Hesan was tired from his long and emotional day, and he followed Pedro to the tent. But then Lejo entered the tent right after Pedro did and settled down into a blanket, and Hesan suddenly decided that he would stay up a while longer.

Hesan joined Dovan where he was sitting by the fire for his watch, plunked down beside him, and sat hypnotized by the dancing flames. After about half an hour, when he was sure that Lejo and Pedro were both asleep in the tent, he rose to get some sleep himself, when Dovan spoke.

“Just a minute, Hesan.”

Sensing what sort of conversation was about to ensue, Hesan sighed quietly and sat back down again. “What is it?”

“I think you know exactly what.”

“If it’s about earlier today, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s not about today.”

“Oh?”

“It’s not even about this trip. It’s about how you treat your brother on a day-to-day basis.”

Hesan thought to himself, Oh, boy, here it comes...

“Almost all of the time, you two treat each other well and respect each other. Some of the time, you really enjoy each other’s company. And some of the time, you seem to prefer not to see each other. Like right now.”

“Did you see what Lejo did today?? He waited until I was moments from finishing putting up the tent, and then he shoved me into it!”

Dovan hushed Hesan. “Shh...you’ll wake up the others.”

“Oh, are you siding with him?”

"I'm not agreeing with his behavior, but there's something that you're missing here. It didn't start with him pushing you."

"Right. Like I pushed him into a tent minutes before."

"No. But you shouldn't have been putting up that tent in the first place."

"I told—" Hesan started to exclaim, and then quieted himself down before starting again, "I told him that we should work together. But he didn't listen!"

"See, that's exactly the sort of thing that Lejo takes as an excuse to pull a stunt like pushing you into a tent, which, by the way, he hadn't meant to cause a huge catastrophe."

"Yeah? Well, he did."

"Which do you consider more important, people's actions or motives?"

"How could motives possibly matter to anyone? No one can read your mind, but anyone can see what you do! Actions are the only thing we can trust."

Dovan visibly disagreed, but left the issue behind after simply replying, "Aelyon looks at the heart. He knows your motives, Hesan."

Neither spoke for several minutes.

Then Hesan stirred. "What were we talking about before this? Were you trying to go somewhere earlier, like excusing my little brother's idiotic move?"

"I don't think you have ears to hear me."

"Whatever that means."

For the first time that Hesan could recall, Dovan lost his patience. He got up from the fireside and left Hesan with an ultimatum before ducking inside the tent flap. "I guess I was right ... you can't hear me."

After he realized that he was now alone by the fire, Hesan settled in for a few hours' wait and observed aloud to no one in particular, "Well, what do you know? It's time for my night watch."

• • • • •

Lejo awoke feeling a pain in his ribs. Groggy, he tried to turn over, but found that Hesan was standing in the darkened tent, nudging him none-too-gently in the side.

"Get up, sleepyhead. It's your turn for a watch."

Not yet fully awake, Lejo pushed himself into a kneeling position and stood unsteadily. Hesan escorted him out of the tent and plunked him down next to the sputtering fire. Lejo was tempted to yank Hesan down onto the low flames, but he was too tired to do anything but combine a grumble with a moan.

Hesan was unimpressed. "Remember what Sir Pedro said? Don't fall asleep!"

Then Hesan was gone, back in the tent.

Lejo rubbed the sleep from his eyes in a desperate gambit to stay awake, but it was not long before his eyelids fluttered, his neck refused to hold his head upright, and cobwebs drifted in his mind. He watched an almost-full moon rise in the night sky, illuminating the landscape in an eerie black and white hue.

Snapping back to alertness, Lejo glanced at the moon and saw that it had moved through a significant amount of the sky. Smoldering embers were all that remained in the fire pit. *Did I seriously fall asleep?*

"Lejo! Wake up, you fell asleep!" Hesan was stumbling out of the tent with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders.

Lejo recalled that Hesan was an exceptionally light sleeper, and routinely got up to check on his surroundings.

He must have awoke, noticed Lejo asleep, and gotten out of bed to rouse him.

“Sorry, Hesan. I’ve been tryi—try—tr—” Lejo stifled a huge yawn.

“Yeah, I know...that’s why I’m worried. You should get back inside the tent and get some rest, rather than letting our whole group rely on a kid who can’t even keep his eyes open for a simple night watch.”

Angry at his brother and at himself, Lejo scrambled brusquely to his feet and stalked away.

“Wrong way, genius. The tent’s behind you.”

“I’m not going to the tent.”

“Oh, really? So then, where lies your true destination?” Hesan asked mockingly.

“I’m going to, um, going to get more firewood.”

“Don’t even think about it!”

“What’ll you do, huh? And don’t send Valeria after me, either, if that’s what you’re planning.”

“Suit yourself. It’s your neck, not mine.”

Lejo didn’t bother to verify Hesan’s statement, but wasted no time leaving the premises of the camp to melt into the distant shadows. Hesan stared stoically at the faintly glowing coals in the fire pit, as if he could ignite them just by the sheer force of his stare.

It seemed only shortly afterward that Pedro took over.

• • • • •

“Where’s Lejo?”

Hesan looked up at Dovan, who was walking aimlessly through the camp. “Isn’t he still asleep in the tent?”

Dovan responded with a level of irritation that Hesan had rarely seen, if ever. “Hesan, when I got up a few minutes ago, you were asleep with Lejo’s blanket stretched on top of your own. You of all people would know that he’s gone.”

To be perfectly honest, Hesan was speechless for a few moments. Finally he mustered the audacity to disprove the statement that there are no stupid questions. “Then why did you ask me where he was?”

Pedro saved Dovan the humiliation of even considering a reply for such a stupid question. “You were the last one of us to see Lejo, I believe. Me and Dovan both haven’t seen him since last night. Do you have something you want to tell us, Hesan?”

Making an uncustomary interruption, Dovan supplied,

“Yeah, like where he said he was going when you ticked him off so that he left the campsite.”

Though Hesan was technically telling truth, he felt a slight pang of guilt when he reported cautiously, “I didn’t make him mad. He just said he was going to get firewood.”

“And so why in your right mind did you let him do so, alone and in the middle of the night?!”

“It wasn’t my idea—”

“That’s ridiculous, Hesan! You’re responsible for him. You’re his older brother!”

“And?? How can you think that I’m responsible for what he does, when he’s the one doing it? That’s not just unfair, that makes no sense!”

Pedro waded into the brewing argument between Hesan and Dovan. “Okay, you two, I think we’ve established the fact that Hesan is not willing to take any blame for this situation. But that pales in importance compared to the fact that Lejo is missing! Where in the Queen’s beard could he be?”

• • • • •

Estevan did not even realize that he had fallen asleep, but the sound of quickly approaching footsteps roused him fully. Forceful hands seized him and his bag of onions, and he was vigorously hefted into the air. Immediately, he was dropped heavily upon the ground amid a string of curses.

Estevan felt like joining in on the profane chorus, but then he recognized the voice of Ulzaq.

“Ugh! You weigh more than the entire capital. It’s a good thing I didn’t feed you anything while you were here, or I wouldn’t be able to pick you up at all! Galeron, c’m’ere and lend me a hand with this fellow.” Together, Estevan’s captors lifted the sack more effectively than the first time and carried it over to the waiting horse-drawn cart.

Ulzaq hopped into the bucket seat to guide the horse, but Galeron roughly lifted him out of the seat with a brief explanation for his actions. “Oh, no you don’t! This time, I’m driving. You missed the stable when you last drove, so thank you so much for the reins.” With a quick jerk, he whisked the driving reins out of the hands of a confused and annoyed Ulzaq. Without leaving time for discussion, Galeron cracked the reins and the horse took off. The sudden burst of speed threw Estevan’s sack violently against the back of the cart.

Ulzaq protested. “Hey, man! What do you think you are, in a race?”

Galeron retorted, “I’m a much better driver than you are!” Illustrating his point, he egged on the horse into a fast canter and swerved boastfully into a side road.

Ulzaq was not convinced. “You’re going to kill us, you reckless idiot!” He tried to grab the reins from the driver but Galeron shoved him harshly back into the seat. “Okay, if you’re going to be rough, then two can play at that game!”

Reacting quickly, Galeron turned sharply into another side street, throwing his passenger against the opposite side of the seat from him. As Ulzaq lunged for him, he kicked the horse into as fast a gallop as it could manage with a cart and three grown men in it. As a result, Ulzaq was slammed into the back of the seat. His temper growing hotter with each passing second, the fierce man dove again for his infuriating comrade.

The cart careened dangerously around the next corner, its sides scraping the edge of a building. Both men were knocked together, and Ulzaq grasped Galeron’s throat in rage. Even though Galeron was occupied with trying to save his own life, still noticed a lone, cloaked figure standing motionless in the road directly in front of them.

In desperation, he body-checked Ulzaq into the side of the bucket seat, and then yanked on the reins to avoid running over the person in the road.

Horse-drawn carts have no brakes to speak of, aside from the stopping power of the horse. Consequently, the horse went one way, but the cart and its passengers

continued to hurtle towards the resolute person with unstoppable momentum. The horse, though not remarkably intelligent, still recognized the danger it was in.

If the cart persisted in its present course, it would drag the horse along with it, thus posing a threat to the horse's wellbeing. With its one horsepower, the animal doggedly pulled the cart to the side until their inertia was sufficiently diverted.

Unfortunately for the horse and the cart still attached to it, that diversion of inertia carried it straight into a vendor's abandoned stall. Smacking headlong into the wooden walls, the sheer mass of the horse and cart crashed almost entirely through them, leaving the back of the cart sticking out of the wall.

The thunderous impact was not only oppressively loud, but it produced a jarring shockwave that carried through the enormous stall. With a horrendous groan, the walls teetered wildly until the whole building collapsed upon itself in a humongous implosion of construction materials and dust.

The figure in the middle of the road rushed toward the debris of the collision. Pulling off the hooded cape to see better, she rummaged through the dirt and rubble for a few tense moments, and then she spotted the crushed frame of the cart. Holding a hand to her mouth, the young woman held back a shriek of horror. Almost afraid to continue, she finally found one of the wheels of the cart lodged on top of a brown, coarse rucksack.

In an unbelievable display of salvation the cart's wheel had remained intact, and supported the weight of a large portion of the roof on it. Without wasting a second, the rescuer unsheathed a short knife and delicately sliced a long, shallow cut into the sack. She revived the dazed Estevan with a gentle shake and, finding his bonds already loose, searched through the debris to find the driver and his accomplice.

The hunt turned out to be unnecessary. A loud moan was followed by Galeron getting unsteadily to his feet, debris showering the ground as he shook it off. The girl quickly went to assist him but was brusquely brushed aside.

Galeron started to walk away, but she asked him fiercely,

"Where do you think you're going? There were two of you in that seat, and you know it. Get right back here and help me find him!"

Galeron was much surprised by the outburst, but he argued, "No. That man is a cruel, heartless man and doesn't deserve to live."

But the girl would have none of it. "That's not true!

Everyone deserves the same chance to live. Help me find him."

Moved by the girl's convictions, Galeron reluctantly joined the other two in their relentless search for his opponent. Estevan, while delving through the wreckage, suddenly realized that in all her earnest conversation, his rescuer had never given her name. "Um, young lady, I owe my life to you, but could you tell me your name?"

The girl glanced up from her work for a moment to flash a coy smile at him. "My name is Eilemé, daughter of Woab, the brother of King Mehosha." About to add something else, Eilemé suddenly gasped. Underneath a heavy, broad wooden beam lay the battered body of Ulzaq.

"Oh, no!" Tears welled up in her big, brown eyes. "I never meant for this to happen!" As Eilemé cried bitterly, Estevan moved past her to the fallen man. He quietly held his fingers to the side of Ulzaq's neck.

After a few moments, he looked up with a hopeful expression. “Don’t worry, Eilemé. He’s still alive, but he was knocked out. It looks like he has some broken bones.

“We’ll need to get him to a doctor soon.”

Galeron walked over to his unconscious comrade and looked down at the bruised face. Estevan asked him cautiously, “Galeron, could you help Ulzaq?”

The only reply was a stern look.

Estevan tried again. “Galeron, if you won’t help Ulzaq, then help me help him.” Finally, Galerón consented and strode through the mess strewn along the ground to the heavy beam on top of Ulzaq.

Grunting and straining, Estevan and Galerón worked together to lift the enormous wooden plank off the trapped body. Eilemé delicately dragged Ulzaq clear of the beam and wrapped him in a thick blanket, ready to transport him. The two men tried to let the beam down slowly, but it was so heavy that at a signal they both just dropped it simultaneously. A muffled boom let the dust fly out from under it.

Estevan and Galerón were ready to leave with Ulzaq, but Eilemé had other ideas. “You’re not just going to let that poor horse die, are you?” Once again, her kind sympathy towards others saved a life. They found the horse on its side, trembling quietly. It was covered in a substantial drift of dust and wood chips but not much else.

Still reeling dizzily from its hard meeting with the wall, the horse nevertheless managed to get back up at Eilemé’s coaxing.

A stroke of luck for Ulzaq, the horse would enable a swift trip to the doctor’s. Letting Galerón take his bundled-up friend on horseback, Estevan volunteered to stay with Eilemé. After the two watched the horse trot dazedly away, the chief asked his rescuer, “When you said, ‘I never meant for this to happen,’ what were you talking about?”

Eilemé, with a sad, guilty look on her face, mumbled a reply with her eyes downcast. “I stood in the middle of the road on purpose so that Galerón would have to swerve out of the way. We were planning it together—Galerón’s daughter Chelar and I are good friends, and she told me about you being held captive and I wanted to do something to help. I just didn’t expect that my actions could cause so much trouble.”

Without a clear, imperative mission to be completed, Eilemé seemed more introverted and shy. She examined the desolate streets, then the decimated remains of the stall, before her eyes returned once more to Estevan’s. His countenance was nearly unreadable. Confusion, astonishment, stern reproof, gratefulness, and relief were all jumbled together so that not even his own wife would have been able to read them all.

At last, he pooled his thoughts together into words as he spoke his mind. “Eilemé, what you did was brash and destructive. I cannot approve or condone it, but I also can see that you have received punishment enough, through the natural consequences of your actions. Now, come. I must speak with the king regarding an important matter, and I’ll drop you off at your home on the way to the palace.”

Expecting a harsh reprimand, Eilemé was pleasantly surprised when Estevan made no further comment and began walking. Letting a small smile adorn her

relieved features, she followed after him after taking one last look at the destroyed building.

Then she wondered why they were leaving the damage unpaid for. “Wait! Estevan, shouldn’t we leave some money for the poor merchant who owns this stall? It’s the least we could do instead of just waltzing off.”

Estevan shrugged. “That’s fine with me, but you’ll have to take care of that yourself.” He turned back to road again, but he had underestimated her capacity for compassion.

With a vehemence that surprised even her, Eilemé expressed a plan to take full responsibility for her actions.

“Take me home and let me collect my savings and then return me here. My house isn’t too far, and I could hardly forgive myself if I knew I bankrupted the owner.”

Request or not, Estevan felt strongly compelled to agree, but then he remembered his mission. “You have noble motives, young lady, but I have to talk to the king...”

“Please? It’s only forty-five minutes there and back.”

“Sorry, but I really must refuse.”

“Please, try to understand me, sir! You won’t be worse for it, I promise.”

The chief still wanted to decline, but his brain was losing to his conscience. “Eilemé, if I could help you, I would, but it’s just too much of a delay.”

“It’s not far, Estevan. You said so yourself, this is the noble thing to do! Please?”

At her final appeal, Estevan broke down. “Yes, I will do it.” Gratitude filling her complexion, Eilemé quickly hugged him and then took off, dragging Estevan behind her.

Chapter IX

With Sore Feet.

„What should we do, now?” Hesan asked. Neither Pedro nor Dovan could answer at first. None of them could bear to speak the horror that all of them were no doubt slowly realizing. The thought of Lejo in the clutches of the merciless Cortez was enough to maintain a sober quiet among the three. For Dovan, however, the likelihood of Lejo’s captivity was too much for him to stay silent.

His buttery, brown eyes burned with an inner flame as he repeated Hesan’s question incredulously. “What should we do, now? What should we do? You are Lejo’s elder brother. Tell me, do you always ask this question when he goes missing?”

For a minute, silence reigned once more, and Hesan expected Dovan to continue. But the man’s question had not been redundant. He asked again, exasperated, “Hesan, what did you do the last time Lejo went missing? Tell me.”

Hesan was uncomfortable with the implication that he did not care about Lejo’s wellbeing. Sarcastically, he turned his eyes upward and held his tongue in the

corner of his lips in a classic thinking pose. After waiting a generous pause for thinking, he explained.

“Well, first I checked behind me to make sure he wasn’t following me. Then I checked all the places I knew he had hid in before. Finally, I had gone to ask Mom when I found him hiding in the laundry basket. Oh, I get it. Let’s all look for a laundry basket!”

Dovan gave Hesan a disappointed look. Not content to let Hesan take the next few minutes to find a deeper meaning behind it all, he uttered, “You’re missing the whole point, Hesan! When he was gone, what did you do?”

“Um, turned around?”

“No! You looked for him, that’s what!”

“Oh. Well then, Archer Dovan, let’s start right now!”

Hesan faked a bright gleam in his eyes that added to the sardonic mood.

Pedro joined in the ironic conversation, and clapped his hands in mock excitement. “That’s the Hesan I know! Wow, Archer Dovan, you sure know how to jog his memory. Now, where should we start?”

Dovan pitched in. “Oh, I’ve got it! We could Lejo’s footprints from the campsite.”

Hesan increased his sarcasm a notch and said, “Yeah, and when we all get ourselves captured and executed by Spaniards, let’s ask if they’ll allow us to keep our heads in little laundry baskets!”

Shaking his head sadly, Dovan countered, “I was being serious about the rescue.”

Almost as soon as his face had lit up, Hesan’s features darkened considerably. “How? We’re only three men and one jaguar, and the Spanish are many. If he’s really been kidnapped, there’s no way we could possibly succeed.”

The damp mood proved contagious, but Pedro still endeavored to convince Hesan of hope for Lejo. Switching tactics towards sincerity, he said, “We don’t exactly know that Lejo was captured by the Spanish.”

Dovan reluctantly burst Pedro’s bubble. “Actually, Sir Pedro, I’m afraid that we have to be realistic. If Lejo really did leave to get firewood, he would’ve returned to camp within half an hour of collecting at the most. The fact that he’s still gone means one of two things: he got hurt and can’t move, or he’s been captured by Spaniards. And even though both could’ve happened, I sincerely doubt that only the first circumstance is true.”

Pedro only hesitated for a few seconds before continuing to speak to Hesan. “Maybe so. Maybe Lejo is a prison with several hundred Spanish soldiers standing between him and us. But even if we aren’t successful, then would we really lose anything we hadn’t already lost? No! If we fail, and Lejo is still a prisoner, he can’t become any more a prisoner than he is right now. Whatever we do to help him is automatically a plus because even if we don’t save him, at least we tried.”

Hesan was still skeptical. “Yeah, we tried, but so what? If we fail, Lejo is still in captivity and our efforts were for nothing. We either succeed or we fail. There’s no in-between. So what’s the use in trying if we aren’t sure of success?”

Disagreeing strongly, Dovan cut into Hesan’s comments. “If you only do anything when you’re sure of succeeding, then that’s a poor outlook on life. I mean, if you’re only sure of something half the time, then all the times you succeed will only be equal to all the times you failed by doing nothing. If you try

once and fail, and then try again and succeed, you end up with the same result. But if you try once and succeed even without being sure of it beforehand, then you have one more success than failure, and that's worth being unsure at first."

Shaking his head, Hesan could not come to the same conclusion. "Sorry, but I can't agree with you on this one. If you two are really going to try and get Lejo out of there, you can go ahead. But as for me, I think it's just foolish."

Pedro could hardly believe his ears. "What? So what are you—you're just going to leave your own mother's son to his fate?"

Now on the defensive, Hesan grunted irritably. "Huh. Where is your faith in Aelyon, Sir Pedro? If he desires for Lejo to be saved, it will happen."

Dovan's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets at Hesan's statement. He actually had to take a deep breath and swallow hard before he was able to respond civilly.

Even so, his last few words wreaked havoc on Hesan's pride. "Faith? Faith, Hesan? No, I think it is your faith that is flawed. Aelyon accomplishes His will through us. And even with His infinite patience, I'm sure He would prefer a willing vessel to a useless one!"

Unable to bear anymore, Hesan's head drooped. The fight had gone out of him, and his voice cracked twice while saying his farewell. "You're right, Dovan. But I still can't do it. You two can go on ahead, but I'm not going with you."

Dovan returned Hesan's sadness, but Pedro was not quite ready to let Hesan go. "Wait just a minute! Where in the world do you think you're going to go?"

"Back home." Hesan said.

"Oh, really?" Pedro countered. "Can you really go back now, empty handed, without letting your family down, your friends down, your whole village down? No, Hesan, you have no other choice."

For another moment, the haughty spirit in Hesan flared up again. His words dripped with acidic sarcasm.

"Sir Pedro, I beg to differ. There's always another way."

And with that misapplied proverb, Hesan spun on his heel. Disregarding his friends and their calls, he walked a few paces and then took off at a cross country gait. A few yards later, Valeria had caught up with him and gently but firmly impeded his progress with her two-hundred-pound weight.

Softening somewhat, Hesan spoke to her reprovingly.

"No, Val, you can't come with me. Lejo and the others need you more than I do right now. Go on, let me go alone. Go back to Dovan and Sir Pedro."

Her tail languishing in the sand, Valeria reluctantly obeyed and lifted her bulk out of Hesan's way. Turning her head to look at Hesan, she met his gaze until he had to look away. He faced away from his three companions and ran off in the opposite direction.

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Flicking his light brown hair out of his eyes, the boy pulled himself into a kneeling position, disoriented. Lejo did not remember how he had gotten here. Events played through his mind of the past few days: the excitement of going on a cool journey, the fear of the Spanish contingent, the relief of their fantastic rescue,

and the thrill of watching a ragtag group of jaguars whup up on the Spanish soldiers.

Nowhere among those memories did a dark, dusty cell belong, so he went along further: the long days of walking, annoying Hesan, walking, gathering firewood, walking, getting captured by Spaniards, walking—wait. Captured by Spaniards?

He looked carefully around, his blue eyes piercing the dank air of his confines. A single sunbeam radiated through the slats in his wagon-sized wooden cage, and he could easily pick out the many specks of dust drifting lazily in and out of the golden light. However, he could not make out many details of anything outside his small prison cell.

When he reached out to touch the walls, he involuntarily gasped at the sharp pain in his wrist. He rolled over onto his back and coped with his newfound aches and the dull thudding in his temple.

Remembering more now, his mind's eye reviewed the scene of his capture. His hand rested on the top of the woodpile, and his other hand was supporting the base of the collection of various sticks. It was dark, but the moon provided a thin, wavering beam of light to help him in his spontaneous task.

Then he had heard something in the distance, closing in on him: hoof beats approaching rapidly.

Hurtling towards him were at least two dozen Spaniards on horseback. He couldn't see them, but he slowly realized that he was in serious trouble. Precious seconds to be used for a getaway plan were spent rousing his brain from its exhausted state, and when he finally realized that he could not run to escape, the horsemen were nearly upon him. Thinking quickly now, almost instinctively, he sprinted straight towards the sound, carrying the pile of wood in his arms.

When he was only seconds away from being trampled by the flailing hooves of the snorting horses, he threw the pile of sticks directly in their path. The loud, clattering noise was miraculously adequate to spook the horses. The mounts reared up with a whinny, unwilling to gallop over the disarray of mere twigs. Grabbing one of the bigger branches, Lejo brandished it like a cudgel and faced the faster Spaniards who had regained control of their steeds and were charging him.

Like a professional torero, Lejo whirled away from the oncoming riders at the last second, sidestepping the one in front and swinging the cudgel with all of his strength. With a crack, the stick shattered in half on the piece of metal protecting the horse's neck, leaving nothing but a small dent in it. Most of the damage sustained in the strike was in his forearm.

For the next few moments, Lejo stood stunned, holding his numb wrist. It did not dawn on him soon enough that his enemies were not about to give him a moment to recover. Lejo's last memory was the image of the frontrunner wielding his gun like a club.

With that picture still vivid in his brain, Lejo shuddered. Gingerly, he brushed his fingers against the side of his forehead and looked carefully at his fingertips in the dark. They did not feel wet, so that was good—no fresh blood. He knew that he was fortunate to have survived his encounter. What he did not know is that his fortune came from the nature of how Spanish soldiers were trained.

Usually, mounted horsemen have swords, and they are taught to slash backwards at targets to get around their defenses. However, the gun that Lejo's attacker held was blunt enough that, when the soldier struck backwards, against the momentum of him and his horse, the force was just strong enough to knock Lejo out, but not to do any more damage.

Lejo sat up, hugging his knees, ignoring the pain in his forearm and head. His wrist was probably sprained or broken, but if he held it still, he knew that it would heal properly. A rumbling growl filled the cell, and it did not take a genius to know how empty Lejo's stomach was. He hoped that his captors would return to check on him and give him some food.

Despite his grim circumstances, Lejo was determined to stand fast like a true Kirtech and hold on to hope. So, to pass the time, he started thinking up a song.

Before he knew it, he had come up with a rather tuneless and tasteless song in his head. The words rhymed well and were quite catchy. Lejo could not wait to start singing.

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A rhythm formed in a correspondence between his breathing and his pace. *In, out. In, out.* Hesan thought to himself. Three strides for breathing in and then the next three for exhaling. Over and over. Again and again.

Forever and ever. How long had he been running? He ignored the urge to look over his shoulder, and instead focused on his inner clock.

A number rose to the surface of his consciousness, and he fished it out of the rhythm to see it on the blank slate he made in his mind at will. "Three hours," he told himself out loud. At his consistent pace of eight miles per hour, times three hours, equaled twenty-four miles he had traveled thus far. Only fifty more miles to go, give or take a few.

A thought clamored for his attention, but Hesan pushed it away mentally. He refused to think about his decision anymore. He tried to concentrate on his running, but it came too easily. He was finally forced to face his thought head on. What were you thinking, leaving them to rescue Lejo on their own?

He replied mentally, "Simple. They were on a suicide mission, and I have no interest in dying so soon."

So instead, you're letting them die for your brother?

"No, it was their decision. I had no need to tell them what to do. All I did was decide for myself."

Yeah, and since when is your life worth more than two others?

"That's not a fair question. Just because they wanted to give up their lives did not mean that I had to go along. In fact..."

...Well? Answer the question.

"Okay, so Lejo's life is worth just as much as anyone's. What was I supposed to do, though? Sacrifice myself along with them for my brother's sake?"

Hmm, what an idea...

"Hey, sarcasm doesn't help anyone in this circumstance."

Sorry, how about this. Maybe, not only is Lejo's life worth saving at the cost of another, but also, a third rescuer could mean the difference between success and failure for the mission.

“So, defeat would be caused by their treacherous third person’s absence, huh?”

Think about it.

“All right, all right. So the guilt approach worked. But the Spanish camp is still another three hours back.”

Are you sure?

“What are you—wait a second...”

Hesan stopped dead in his tracks, panting softly. His attention was not trained on his breathing anymore.

Bewildered, Hesan looked in all directions and then closed his eyes. Upon opening them, he rubbed his eye sockets and removed his hands. Finally, he simply rubbed his chin as he surveyed his bizarre situation. No. It couldn’t be. Not again. Had it already been another seven hours or so?

The hair on the back of his neck rose uncomfortably, and a shiver ran through him as a mysterious chill went up and down his spine. In some weird quirk of time, the miles between him and Murixcanaoy had disappeared, literally. In front of him, about half a mile away, the sight of the bustling civilization of the capital city reached Hesan’s disoriented vision. Inexplicably, he had made the seventy-five mile trek in one afternoon, when it had taken him two days of walking to travel the distance before.

At first, Hesan could hardly believe the position of the sun was being honest. Then he noticed a second, equally abrupt deviation from the norm. A company of soldiers was camped on the doorstep of the giant city, and the flash of sunlight from the shiny armor indicated that they were Spaniards.

Remembering the job that Pedro had delegated to Sir Knojes and Sanchez, Hesan put two and two together and figured that these soldiers were under their command.

Since they were supposedly friendly towards the Mayans, hospitality would have dictated that they be housed inside of Murixcanaoy for the night. However, the company was still obviously out in the open, which meant that either they had been denied entrance or, much more likely, that it was not nighttime yet.

Hesan knew that what he was seeing was physically impossible. So he refused to believe it was true. Out loud, he told himself, “I guess I was wrong about how far we had traveled from Murixcanaoy.” Though he said the words, it did not help to convict him of their veracity.

Quietly amazed, and not a little unnerved, Hesan nevertheless spent another minute observing Murixcanaoy for the first time since his last visit as a young child. He was standing on a high ridge, and from his vantage point, the entire city sprawled below him. The late morning sun held the capital securely in its pink-gold grasp. Viewed in such light, the whole place looked as if it were coated with a fine golden dust, and Hesan could not help but admire his perspective despite the paranormal journey that had brought him there.

The city had none of the giant, stone walls that were characteristic of European castles. Instead, a short wooden stockade encircled the city, more gently contrasting with the surrounding landscape. The scattered desert sands and patches of brown dirt to the east turned into rich earth, grass, and finally jungle as it continued westward, toward the city.

Dominating the horizon, Volcán Tajumulco loomed high and green with foliage until the tree line. Using the mountains as natural protection from the ocean's coast to the far west, Murixcanaoy also relied heavily on the dense jungle and an array of ravines and ridges naturally carved into the land to defend from attackers to the east.

Inhaling deeply, Hesan set off for the final leg of his journey, which he knew could prove to be just as difficult: weaving his way through the crowded, jostling throngs that always filled the streets in the evening.

Trotting down the hillside, he kicked up a small cloud of brown, earthy dust. A wind came from behind him and blew it all over him, making him cough and try to cover his watery eyes with his short sleeve. The resulting mixture of dirt and tears smeared on his face, giving him the look of a forlorn, beaten, and dirty street urchin.

Combined with the windblown, almost strained countenance that he always got after running for more than a few minutes, he had a face that would make a baby cry.

Recognizing this, Hesan swiped irritably but ineffectually at the streaks on his face again and again until he gave up after making little improvement to his appearance.

At last, he had reached the gates of the city. Craning his head to see the watchman at the top of the gate, Hesan called out loudly, using his diaphragm to expel the words with enough force to be easily heard. "Ahoy, gatekeeper! Would you be able to open the gates for me?"

The gatekeeper looked preoccupied with some other business, and he peered down suspiciously at Hesan.

Before replying, a shout from the other side of the gates drew his attention. He disappeared from view for a few moments, and Hesan was about to call out again when the gates opened slowly and smoothly.

The galloping of hooves alerted Hesan to move out of the way, and he jumped clear of the rider. When Hesan snapped his eyes towards the rider, he was startled to recognize Sir Knojes. The messenger reined in his horse, which reared up with a neigh, and was about to apologize to Hesan for nearly running him down when an equally startled look of recognition flickered across his face.

"Hesan? Is that you?" Sir Knojes asked skeptically.

Hesan realized that his muddy features were probably difficult to distinguish, so he confirmed the rider's suspicions.

"Yes, Sir Knojes, it's me. Aren't you surprised to see me?"

Actually, Sir Knojes looked more than surprised. His eyes widened in astonishment, and his voice lowered considerably. "Wow, you're one fast young man." After another second, his tone suddenly turned urgent. "Anyway, I've got to get back to Sanchez and the other soldiers. I don't have a whole lot of time right now, so how about you make your way to the palace, okay?"

Without really waiting for an answer, Knojes slapped the reins and sent his horse lunging forward, and he was out of earshot in a few moments. Hesan turned away and walked through the open gates before they were shut. He strode calmly for the next minute or so, and then it became too difficult to stride calmly anymore.

Tens of thousands of swarming people were now in between him and the palace. Taking in another deep breath, Hesan waded in ambitiously.

It was impossible to be polite and apologize to everyone he jostled because there was literally not enough space for him to avoid contact with them. So instead, Hesan took out all his frustration of the past few days on the immutable masses and heartily began elbowing and pushing his way through. Because of his appearance and behavior, Hesan was eventually able to clear a relatively wide berth—almost six inches around in every direction.

Utilizing this cushion of space, Hesan made fairly good time, and finally the crowds thinned out as he left the main marketplace and reached the courtyard of the palace.

However, he soon discovered that the guards of the palace stairs thought he was coming to beg, and they threatened to forcefully kick him out if he did not leave. Hesan realized that he needed to make a change in tactics.

Chapter X

Dirty Faces.

She could not slow her pace down to catch her breath. Not because she was unable, but because she knew that to waste more of Estevan's time would only make him less likely to want to keep helping her. Fortunately for Eilemé, her house was just around the corner.

Running alongside her, Estevan seemed to sense her lifted spirits. "So, Eilemé," he chuffed, "how close are we now? It's been more than half an hour already."

Apologetic, Eilemé softly replied, "We're almost there."

The two of them ran to the large hut, and Eilemé called back to Estevan, "I'm gonna run inside. Would you mind staying here for a sec?"

Barely hearing his remark of compliance, Eilemé scurried through the door and down the short hallway.

Ducking into her room, she was mortified and outraged to find Yert rummaging through her drawers.

On the verge of screaming, she hustled her surprised and guilty little brother out of the room with an exasperated squeal. Slamming her door behind him, she rested on the safe side of the door, panting.

After a moment, she remembered her mission. First making sure that Yert was not still watching, she hurried to her bedpost. Opening a secret compartment her father Woab had made for her, she reached her arm inside and pulled out a small but heavy purse.

Replacing the cover of her bedpost, Eilemé rushed back outside to where Estevan was waiting somewhat impatiently. "Okay," she said, "we can head back to the broken stall."

Off again at a clip, she led Estevan back through the winding alleyways of Murixcanaoy to the destroyed merchant stall. Depositing her life savings at the

outer rim of the wreckage, she stood a minute more before turning around to face Estevan expectantly.

He looked back at her disbelievingly. "What, you think you can just leave it like that? If you went through all the trouble of the past hour, why not wait a little longer for the owner to return?"

Startled at his reaction, Eilemé turned defensive. "But I don't want to sit here in the dark street all alone tonight. What if the owner is gone for more than a day? How could I find out who the owner is?"

Shaking his head, Estevan's voice was bordering on frustration. "I don't know. Go talk to the person at the archives of property records. He'll have the owner's name down."

Desperately, Eilemé asked, "Where can I find him?"

Estevan grumbled, "He'll be in the palace."

"Hey, that's where you're going now, right?" Eilemé confirmed as she scooped up the sack of money back into her hand.

"Yes," he answered without hiding his irritation.

Eilemé looked him in the eye. "Estevan, I'm not trying to bother you. I saved you, remember? Now, just work with me on this."

His attitude softening, Estevan relented. "Yeah, I'm sorry. It's been a long day for me."

"I know," she replied understandingly.

Smiling haggardly, Estevan commented, "What I would like more than anything else right now is a rest."

Returning his grin, Eilemé looked over the buildings and pointed at the palace rising a few hundred yards away.

"Over there is the palace," she said helpfully.

"I guess a few more minutes of running wouldn't kill me," Estevan admitted. Starting his momentum forward, he raced Eilemé to the palace.

Only a few seconds behind him, she slowed when she reached the courtyard. Seeing a well nearby, she decided to rinse her face and make herself a little more presentable.

Wood chips and bits of gravel covered her cotton dress, and sweat plastered her sandy brown hair to her scalp.

She had pulled up the bucket from the bottom and was gratefully dowsing her head with the cool, clear water when a voice startled her. "Uh, when you're done there, could I borrow the bucket?"

Spluttering and choking on the water, Eilemé whirled around to greet the stranger. Wiping her wet face so she could see clearly, she almost involuntarily flinched backwards when she saw the speaker. He was covered with a brown coat of mud from head to foot.

He spoke again. "I'm kind of thirsty, too. So, whenever you're finished there..."

The voice sounded like one she already knew, but she was too flustered to recognize it now. Politely, she offered the bucket to him, saying, "Here. I think you need it more than I do."

With an appreciative thank you, the stranger accepted the bucket. For a second he seemed uncertain as how best to accomplish his shower, but in the end, he simply dumped the remaining water directly onto the top of his dirty head.

Eilemé would have complained about getting splashed, but the stranger stood as if waiting for something. After an awkward, dripping silence, the person cleared his throat and asked another question. “I don’t suppose you have some sort of towel, do you? My clothes are probably dirty enough to make me just as muddy as I was before if I tried drying myself off with them.”

Ordinarily, she would have thought the question strange and discomfiting, but the manner in which he had asked her struck a chord in her. The request was totally sincere and not rude or disrespectful. Without fully understanding why, she untied her dark, hooded cape from around her waist and handed it to him.

Once again, he thanked her enthusiastically and swathed the cloth across his face a few times and then tousled his hair with it. When he looked up and met her eyes, Eilemé was taken aback. The stranger in front of her was not a grisly tramp, but a young man, about her own age.

He glanced at the cloth and grimaced. “Huh, you probably don’t want this back quite yet. Here, I’ll wash it for you.” Before she could object, he had walked over to the well and placed her cloak in the bucket and was lowering it into the water below. After hearing the splash far below, he quickly pulled it back up. The bucket was filled to the brim, but he seemed not to have much trouble getting it back to the surface.

Rinsing out the garment and squeezing it out again a few times, he finally returned it to her. “Thanks a bunch, uh...” he looked at her keenly.

At first, she was not sure what he wanted, but then she introduced herself. “Oh, I’m Eilemé, daughter of Woab. What’s your name?”

The young man spoke clearly, extending a hand. “You can call me Hesan, son of the chief of the Kirtech village.”

A revelation suddenly dawned on Eilemé. “By any chance, is your dad named Estevan?”

Startled, Hesan nodded his head in confusion. “Yes, but how did you know that?”

Animatedly, she explained how she had heard from Galeron’s daughter about Estevan being held captive by the two thugs, how she had undertaken her rescue attempt, how it had worked, and how she had come to the palace.

The whole time, Hesan’s jaw was slightly ajar.

When she had finished, he exclaimed, “I can hardly believe it. My dad, captured by sinister men with a mysterious plan, and I didn’t even know about any of it! Cool! I guess I owe you one, Eilemé. Of course, you might have trouble believing my own story, too.”

“Are you sure?” she taunted, grinning. “You’re not the only one who’s had strange stuff happen to you, Hesan.”

And so, he outlined the scenario that was all unfolding less than a hundred miles away. Hesan included the part about him and Valeria capturing Pedro all the way to the jaguar incident in the ravine with the Spanish contingent.

He did not talk about his accident with putting up the tent or about how he did not want to help rescue Lejo. He also opted out of describing his mystifying trip from the Spanish camp to the capital. He finished by telling her about the entire squadron of Spanish defectors sitting outside the city walls, waiting to join the Mayan army.

Unlike some girls who would just gasp or moan in a trembling voice at the news, Eilemé wanted to do something about it. Excited, she jumped at the chance to join the adventure. “I know!” she exclaimed. “I’ll go tell my father about it, and he can talk with King Mehosha.”

Hesan was not so sure. “Wait, hold on just a moment. Your dad can just ask the king to consult him on this? Who is he?”

Eilemé had forgotten that Hesan was not from around the capital, so he would not have known what was common knowledge among her other friends. So she explained to him, “My father, Woab, is Mehosha’s younger brother. That’s why he can talk freely with the king.”

Hesan’s mouth creaked open again before he replied incredulously, “Woab, the king’s brother? Whoa! And I thought my dad was high up. Wow, so does that make you like some sort of princess?”

Though he was not trying to be disrespectful, Eilemé found that his comment sounded much too similar to the other hundreds that she had heard in her life. Always, they came from people who were ready to do anything for her, be the best friend in the world to her, just to get from her what they envied. That was why she and Galeron’s daughter, Chelar, had bonded so well. Chelar just wanted to be accepted, and Eilemé wanted a friend who was a genuinely loving person, not someone who simply desired her access to the king.

Without thinking, she responded bitterly to his question, “No! I’m not a princess. I’m just a normal girl. But if all you can think of me is some stuck-up, royal lady, then I hope I never see you again!”

The scathing rebuke slipped out before she realized that Hesan had not intended to sound like that. She watched, horrified and ashamed, as first surprise, then hurt, and finally anger registered in his face.

But before Hesan could retaliate, she quickly interjected her apology. “Wait, no. I’m sorry, Hesan. I didn’t mean what I said. Well, I meant the first part, but I don’t wish I never see you again. I’m just tired of people not thinking of me as a human being, with feelings and dreams, but as some way to get higher up on the ladder. I’m sorry.”

Relief flooded her when Hesan’s anger faded from his face. His furrowed eyebrows lifted and his scowl disappeared. Inadvertently, she hoped that she would never find herself on the receiving end of this guy’s wrath again.

Now Hesan was staring at her with his green-brown eyes shining clearly into her own.

A puzzled grin cracked his features, and he lifted a hand up to his chin to scratch at some leftover mud starting to caked on his skin. Finally, Hesan stepped forward and around her. Turning back, he said with an ironic bow, “Well, Miss I-am-not-a-princess, what say we go see your father and see the king?” She returned his smile and followed him up the steps.

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“What do you see?” he asked.

In reply, Pedro handed Dovan the spyglass, which was by now wiped clean of the inky, black ring that had inexplicably returned around the eyepiece. Dovan took it and used it to gaze at the distant camp.

A wave of despair washed briefly over him, but then he steeled himself and focused on his trust in Aelyon and in his friends. Confidence rang true in his voice when he spoke again. “Pedro, I think we can do this.”

Tu Madre did not share Dovan’s self-assurance, and he confessed this. “Yeah, but what good does that do? Just your thinking that we can do this doesn’t make those six hundred Spaniards go away. How do we know this plan is going to work?”

Smiling good-naturedly, Dovan reassured him, “We don’t need to know if it will or not. Lejo is counting on us.” Valeria seemed to agree by looking at the Spanish camp with an ominous rumbling in her throat, twitching her tail with restrained eagerness.

Recalling Hesan’s folly from that afternoon, Pedro decided to believe his companion’s words, forget his doubt, and go along anyway.

Three sentries stood guard in their section of the camp—one for each of them, if all went well. And Pedro fervently hoped that all would go well. Checking with the spyglass once more to make sure that there were not too many others walking about in the camp, Pedro and Dovan crept towards the camp with Valeria stalking stealthily ahead of them.

Valeria had some strange way of recognizing what her human accomplices needed, and so she expertly padded along the stretch of open desert ground, staying low and allowing her natural camouflage to let her blend into invisibility.

The other two sentries were startled and, suffice to say, confused, when the third went down with a low gasp of pain. Melting into the background, Valeria left the unfortunate guard bleeding badly from a raking wound across the ribs. Before the remaining two were quite sure what had happened, they were also taken out smoothly and quietly by two padded bludgeons.

Dovan murmured to Pedro, “I sure would hate to be the person to come between that cat and her destination.”

He winced in sympathy with the stunned and wounded guards and then moved on behind Pedro, who knew his way around the camp with some degree of certainty.

The late evening dusk was not dark enough to keep alert eyes from spotting them, so the two men had to be especially careful to avoid detection. Dovan was on the lookout for other guards when he heard Pedro whisper a signal. He glanced over and saw Pedro wave frantically towards a nearby tent.

When they entered, they immediately saw the large, wooden crate and hurried to it. They woke the sleeping boy and were overjoyed to find that he was Lejo.

“Hey, guys, why won’t you let a growing boy get his sleep?” the boy asked groggily before realizing where he was.

“Shush, Lejo, it’s not even dark out yet. We need to keep it down in case there are people up and moving,” Pedro warned.

Lejo the prisoner looked around the cage and asked, “Can you guys bust me out of here? I’m not too happy staying cooped up like this. Look, there’s Valeria!”

The other two turned and saw the big cat enter the tent with her ears flattened and a low, yowling growl.

Dovan took the warning and poked Pedro in the ribs, whispering, "I think that Valeria may be trying to tell us something. Take a quick check and see if anyone's coming. Everybody else, stay put and don't talk."

Pedro cautiously groped around the edge of the tent flap and scanned the immediate vicinity once without seeing anyone. He was about to head back inside when he heard voices from around the corner. He listened for just long enough to deduce who they were and where they were going, and then he jerked his head through the opening back into the safety of the tent.

"Dovan!" he hissed. "We've got to get out of here now! Two guys are coming this way to check on the prisoners."

Mumbling an apology to Lejo, Dovan wished him well and told him that they would return later to rescue him. Then he rushed out of the tent with Pedro and Valeria.

At this point, the three of them had one goal: to escape successfully from the camp, with or without being spotted. If they were caught, they could not help Lejo, so they spurred themselves into breakneck speed.

Pumping his arms and legs rapidly, Pedro headed for the outskirts of the camp. He knew that if he looked back to see if the others were following, he could very well trip or crash noisily, so he just kept going at top speed. Even staring straight ahead, he could not readily distinguish the shadows blurring past him.

Not until later that evening did he realize how very close he was to getting lost or losing his companions. For the moment, however, he made it clear of the huddled Spanish tents with Dovan and Valeria hot on his heels.

Wheezing and doubled over, he slowly regained his breath. Being an officer in the Spanish army did not lend itself well to vigorous activities for two reasons. First, one sits in a horse saddle most of the time. Second, officers get more food than common soldiers. So, Pedro was badly out of shape and showed it.

Once they were out of earshot, Pedro groaned and massaged his aching sides. Jokingly, he rasped, "Valeria, next time we try that, I get to ride on you." Not sensing his humor, the jaguar snarled unappreciatively.

However, Dovan was in a clowning mood, too, and he joined in the fun. "No, Pedro, that's not at all how we planned it. She's the getaway cart, and Lejo has to ride her."

Now Valeria was glaring at both men, so Dovan quickly ruffled the top of her head like he had seen Hesan do. Reluctantly calming down, the cat settled for plopping down onto the warm sand. She seemed not to notice that she had done so right on top of Pedro's sore feet, or she chose to ignore it. The Spaniard's anguished yelp carried far into the night sky.

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El Caballero Oscuro was much relieved to see Knojes approaching from the distance. He strode out to greet the messenger gratefully, expecting clear, concise instructions from the king, or maybe some important directive from the mayor, if there were a mayor.

What he got instead was a faraway look in Knojes's eyes and no directions whatsoever. "Excuse me, Sir Knojes, what's going on?"

Without even looking at him, the messenger asked him a strange question. "Sanchez, how fast could you travel eighty miles on foot?"

Sanchez could hardly believe his ears. "What?" he asked hopelessly.

Now Knojes frowned at him. "Come now, man, your leader just asked you a question. I expect you to at least pretend to be intelligent and answer it."

Not letting on to his frustration, the Spaniard thought a moment. "A two day's walk, sir," he answered. He added, "Without rest, maybe one day."

Knojes stared at him. "That's what I thought, also. Tell me, do you think it's possible to run the whole distance in one morning?"

Almost insulted at the ridiculous suggestion, Sanchez immediately countered, "No. No way, no how. Not on foot. Most men can't even run half that distance without stopping or falling dead. Why do you ask?"

Distracted by something that he would not elaborate, Knojes just shook his head. "No reason. I was just wondering." When Sanchez gave him a strange look, the other returned it without mercy. After a few more long seconds of their stare-down, one of the Spanish soldiers approached the two of them and voiced his observation that no one was doing anything yet.

Suddenly focusing, Knojes raised his voice. "Look lively now, men! The king says we're welcome to occupy the barracks inside the city, so let's get moving. If you want a good sleep tonight, then you'll hurry and get there!"

In a second, the whole camp was a blur of motion.

The infantry and foot soldiers had it easiest because all they needed to do was get their gear together and, if they were the lowest on the food chain, pack up the tent where each squad slept. The cavalry took longer.

They all had their horses lashed to a patch of the dry tufts of grass that spotted the ground. Not quite desert and not quite forest, the ground where they were located was mostly dirt. However, it had just enough moisture and natural fertilizer that prickly, brown grass weeds could survive, if not flourish.

Bridling and saddling their steeds was the next big part of getting ready to hit the road for the mounted conquistadors. Trained to accomplish this single-handedly if need be, they all nevertheless were happy to help each other with this task in order to expedite the process of making the half-mile trek to the capital as a contingent.

The hardest job of all was that of the cannon wagon drivers. Fortunately, the artilleries were not deployed, so the gargantuan chore of dismantling them and hefting each two-hundred-and-fifty-pound field piece back into its cart was not necessary. The only job left was coaxing the stubborn mules to be roped to the wagons. Though not as difficult, it still proved to be time-consuming.

When the whole shebang was ready to go, Knojes had been impatiently pacing back and forth. The instant that he heard word of their status, he took a few running steps towards the front of the line. Remembering that he had borrowed a horse, he skidded to a stop and pivoted towards where his horse had been tacked to a stake. When he saw the stake but no horse, he was about ready to tear his hair out.

That was when Sanchez saw him and became quite concerned. "Uh, Sir Knojes? Is everything all right?" he asked.

Whirling around to face him, Knojes blasted into Sanchez's face, "Where is my horse?! I staked him right there, and he's...he's—"

"...Not there anymore?" Sanchez supplied.

Sputtering with barely contained rage, Knojes looked capable of sending Sanchez's buffeted and broken body hurling through the air.

Sensing this, Sanchez wisely said nothing and simply gestured over to where Knojes's horse was waiting behind him, already saddled. The blood drained from the messenger's face and was not immediately replaced with the normal flush.

Still pale, Knojes gasped, "Let's...go...now."

Sanchez nodded, relieved, and he helped the mute Mayan onto his mount. Speaking for Knojes, he called for the group's attention. "Everybody! This is what Sir Knojes says. It's important, so listen."

He paused for dramatic effect and then drew out each word carefully and sarcastically, "Let's...go...now."

Pleased with himself, he ordered, "All right, forward, march!"

Recovering now, Knojes shot Sanchez a scathing look.

Wincing in spite of himself, the Spaniard instinctively ducked his head. Luckily, there was no projectile aimed for it. Not aimed at his head, that is. The egg-sized rock bounced off of his back plate armor, making a ring that sounded not unlike a bell.

Laughing now, Knojes apologized and offered to shake Sanchez's hand on it. Naturally, the Spaniard only increased the distance between the two of them. Knojes just went along, chuckling because he knew that as soon as they arrived, the king wished to see both him and Sanchez along with the twins. What were their names again? Rug and Texas? Whatever.

Chapter XI

„It's All Coming Together, Now“.

King Mehosha, alone in his throne room, cracked his knuckles anxiously. Looking small and forlorn in his immense, high-backed chair, he was troubled. It had been a very long day, one of disappointing news and concerned citizens seeking gossip. All he wanted now was the closure of the royal reception room so he could retire for the night.

His kingdom had gone from bad to uncontrollable in the past several days, due to rumors of war with the Spanish.

Mayan political structure had deteriorated in the past half a millennium, to the point where each of the individual Mayan city-states situated in the Yucatán Peninsula fended mostly for itself. Mehosha was very aware of this, but also of the fact that without cooperation, the Maya would be completely wiped out by the Spanish army.

Accustomed to peace, Mehosha nonetheless knew that his days of neutrality would probably be ending sooner than ever thanks to his agreement to house the

Spanish renegades in his city. Cortez would no doubt see this act as hostile, or at least dissenting, and would be quick to retaliate.

The king had conferred with Woab many times in the last week, and he seemed to agree that at the time, negotiations were still the best option. However, the messenger Knojes had arrived earlier today and told him about the conversion of the eighty Spaniards to the aid of the Mayan army. Admittedly, the addition of gunpowder and steel weapons was very well received, but the consequence of accepting their help was that it all but proclaimed their intent to resist Cortez's invasion.

Mehosha looked up to see a courier announcing the arrival of a chief wanting to see him. Reluctantly, he signaled to let the man come before him. Expecting a whining, complaining chieftain who wanted to know as much as he could without learning the truth, Mehosha was surprised, pleasantly so, when Chief Estevan of the Kirtech clan introduced himself.

Without rising from his kneeling position, Estevan politely inquired, "Your servant, Estevan, would like to speak with you, your majesty."

He did not move, and the king realized that he was waiting to be allowed to stand. "Rise, Chief Estevan. You may speak freely."

Only then did the man stand up straight, and he looked directly into the king's eyes. His mouth opened, but before he could make any sound, the courier, whose name was Skutl, returned and pronounced the coming of two adolescents, a boy and a girl.

Estevan suddenly said, "Oh, I'll bet that's your niece, Eilemé. She rescued me from a few ruffians this morning."

At a questioning glance from the king, Estevan explained, "That's a long story, so it would be better to ask me later."

Fascinated now, Mehosha allowed the courier to let the next two people inside.

The young man walked in, followed closely by the young lady. When Estevan saw them enter, his eyes almost bugged out of his head, and he quavered, "Hesan? Is that you, my son?"

Wordlessly, the chief and the boy ran toward each other and embraced joyfully. After watching them awkwardly for a moment, Eilemé turned and greeted her uncle, King Mehosha. At his request, she explained briefly how she had indeed rescued Estevan and how she had met his son, Hesan, at the well.

At this point, Estevan and Hesan released each other self-consciously. Though Estevan surely wanted to have his son relate the entirety of his tale, he seemed content with just having Hesan by his side again.

Now that all four were done talking, Hesan finally got the chance to introduce himself to the king. Taking a knee at the throne, he started to speak quickly and stumbled over his words in no time at all. Trying again, he intoned deliberately and reverently, "My king, I am honored to be in your presence. More than honored, actually...I'm almost speechless. I can hardly believe that I'm sitting here at your feet. Oh, by the way, my name's Hesan. ...Kirtech, that is.

„My father is Estevan, but...you've probably figured that out by now and, umm..." He almost continued to speak but then evidently decided against it and settled with remaining tongue-tied.

Very much amused by the polite young man's attitude, Mehosha laughed at his self-consciousness. "Hesan, son of Estevan, you may rise." The boy was quick to oblige and stood up so fast that he wobbled slightly on one foot. The king did not get a chance to say anything else before Skutl announced the arrival of four more newcomers.

The first four faced the second wave and exchanged silent bouts of scrutiny while the Skutl droned on with a nasally yet strident tone. "Your majesty, sir, and young people, may I introduce to you Sir Knojes the messenger, Texur and Ruxet the twins, and the Spaniard, Sanchez el Caballero Oscuro." Then he exited the quiet room.

As though those few seconds of silence were all that they could handle, the twins eagerly broke it with their peculiar staccato way of conversing.

"Good evening, your majesty."

"If it is a good evening, that is..."

"Unless, of course—"

"Which would obviously mean—"

"And that only makes sense if—"

"Why, you don't say—"

"But wouldn't that happen only when—"

"Suddenly this is more than—"

"Everyone needs to know!"

"Everyone must hear!"

"Everyone should find out!"

"Everyone—"

"Stop." The king's firm command was directed both to their words and to their actions. Texur and Ruxet had both begun to twitch excitedly throughout their double monologue until at the end they were in the very motion of leaving the throne room. Mehosha would not stand to let them make the touchy situation with the Spanish worse by spreading rumors. All it would take was a spark of panic to set the city aflame in turmoil and panic.

"This is what we must all do. Each of you will tell me your story, and please try to keep it relevant to current events. Hopefully, we all will gain a bigger piece of the picture here, and I will act on the information. Chief Estevan, you may begin."

Looking around at the others in the circle, Estevan's eyes passed over Eilemé and came to rest on Hesan for a second, and then he moved on past the twins and Knojes until he saw Sanchez and remembered how his story began.

"My tale starts with the arrival of another Spaniard, one named Pedro San Xavier. He was the captain of a scouting group, which Sergeant Sanchez over there was part of. He witnessed how Hesan and a jaguar, which he calls Valeria, captured Sir Pedro."

Mehosha intently examined Hesan as Estevan said this. Though not unbelievable, this tidbit certainly impressed and convinced him that this young man was maybe a bit more than the eyes might reveal at first.

Estevan was moving on. "When Sir Pedro reached our village, I realized that the threat of Spanish conquest was not only viable, it was likely to happen soon. So I appointed an archer and trustworthy friend of mine, Dovan, to escort Hesan and Pedro to Murixcanaoy along with my other son, Lejo, and a few additional men

from my village. All this was to occur while I went to another village to see what news they had that could supplement my own information.

“While I was there, I was invited into the hut of an elder whose name I did not catch. Anyway, he had apparently hired two thugs to abduct me, for as I stepped inside, they knocked me out, and I awoke tied up in an onion sack.” Estevan shook his head as if to clear his head of the awful memory.

“They hid me in a cart and drove me here and kept me for another day or so in the home of the one named Galeron. Well, it just so happens that your niece, Eilemé, is friends with Galeron’s daughter, Chelar. So, the two of them conspired to free me, and so when the two rogues were en route with me to the next destination in their scheme, Eilemé startled the horse so that it would crash.

„What she did not intend for is that the horse hurled the cart and its occupants into a merchant’s stall, knocking a supporting wall down and collapsing the entire building.”

Embarrassed and slightly red-faced, the young lady squirmed self-consciously and looked towards the ground.

When she met Hesan’s eyes, he gave her a friendly smile of support. About to continue, Estevan was yet again interrupted by a ninth party making a rushed entrance to the room.

Galeron, not even waiting to be announced, hurtled into the king’s presence and skidded painfully to a stop.

Panting with exertion, he grimaced as he rubbed his crash-related injuries. Before anyone could say anything, he pitched unexpectedly to the ground. Ruxet and Texur, who were closest to him, caught him and labored to keep his considerable mass from hitting the stone floor. Stirred from their startled stupor, the others helped the twins lower him carefully to rest as the king called for a physician.

No sooner was Galeron lying flat than he struggled to rise again. He coughed, and then he gasped out, “Get your filthy hands off me! I just need a moment to rest.”

Looking at the fallen man at his feet, Mehosha chuckled. He carefully regarded Galeron under a mask of mild amusement, and then got up from his throne. “Really? Well, in that case...” With that, Mehosha walked up to Galeron, grabbed his arm, and yanked him forcefully to his feet. Though Galeron was at least a foot and a half taller than the diminutive king, he stood painfully upright and looked down into a pair of royally intense eyes.

“...Good, because the sooner we can all figure out what’s going on, the better. Since you’re fine with standing there,” Mehosha did not finish his statement, but raised his eyebrows expectantly.

When the implied touché sank in, Galeron raised his voice insolently. “You stinking, little—”

“My king, do you require security to attend you?” interrupted Skutl. “That man before you ran through the guards before we could accost him.”

Not once letting his eyes leave Galeron’s furious gaze, Mehosha called to the courier, “One moment, if you please, Skutl. This man may yet learn his manners.”

Galeron, however, refused to submit, and in a few moments, he uttered an irritated growl. But neither did the king back down, and so Galerón's growl ended with an exasperated bellow.

Again, Skutl implored, "Your highness, I can and will remove him from your presence at the instant you so desire."

With a groan, more from exasperated embarrassment than from actual pain, Galerón reluctantly made a request.

"Your highness, I..." he sighed, and then continued, "Could I sit down?"

Grinning subtly from his victory in the quiet, unseen battle of wills, the king was still gracious when he permitted the man to ease his aching body. "Yes, you may."

Having waited to hear those words, Skutl instantly appeared with several guards, apparently with the intention of escorting Galerón out of the throne room. "Hold, Skutl. I was not speaking to you. Let him be, for now." Skutl reluctantly halted the guards from their duty.

"Thank you, your majesty," murmured Galerón as he sat back down on the warm, thick rug spread out in the conference room.

Finally, Estevan could continue his story, and so he addressed the king respectfully, "Your highness, with your permission, I would like to finish my tale."

Returning his attention to the interrupted party, Mehosha was quick to acquiesce. "My good fellow, you are more than welcome to do so."

"It is not much longer, but there is more of it beyond my knowledge. After Eilemé made a hurried trip to her house and brought her life savings in order to pay back the owner whose stall she destroyed, she showed me the way to the palace. That is when I found myself here, your majesty, but there are still questions that remain unanswered. Who was the chieftain who captured me?

Why was I targeted for such an attack? And while I'm at it, how did you get here so fast, Hesan?"

Before the speaker's son could answer the direct question, Mehosha held up his hand for silence. "Not yet, young man. After all, ladies first, you know." After shooting a secret smile at the mildly flustered Hesan, the king addressed his niece, "Eilemé, it's your turn."

Instantly, eight pairs of eyes snapped to place, skewering Eilemé with sudden, stiff shyness. After a second that dragged on for years in her imagination, she took a deep breath and began with a nervous smile tugging at her face. "My name is—well, I guess you all know now, but it's Eilemé. Woab's my dad, and so King Mehosha's my uncle. Galerón's daughter, Chelar, is my friend, and she knew that he and Ulzaq were holding a man prisoner in her house. She and I made a plan to free him, but then things moved too fast for us, and before we were ready, they were going to transport him. So, I went on without her and picked a spot I knew they would have to pass through. I scared the horse so that it would crash, and so that I could rescue Estevan. But, I...he...I didn't mean..." Losing her confidence suddenly and completely, she sniffled with genuine sorrow. "I hurt someone. Ulzaq. I didn't like him, but I still didn't mean it..." She did not continue.

After a short wait, Mehosha prompted her gently.

"And the stall? Are you going to repay the merchant who owns it?"

Nodding her head emphatically but silently, Eilemé pulled out the small bag of coins from her cape and showed it to the group.

Following another moment of expectant silence, the king clucked sympathetically, "I'm sorry, but your money can only pay for a fraction of the cost of a new building. This amount hardly covers even a down payment."

The girl's head drooped in miserable regret. The picture was so pitiable that Mehosha hurried to comfort her. "But, I know that whoever the owner is, they would be happy to arrange restitution between you and, say, the royal treasurer."

Making sure that she had heard correctly, Eilemé repeated his words, "The royal treasurer? Do you mean, you'll pay for it?" Seeing the king nodding his head, Eilemé barely contained a squeal of gratitude. "Oh, thank you, unc—I mean, your majesty." She remembered to curtsy, and she bent at the waist, letting both of her hands rise from her sides and grasping each arm with the opposing hand as she had learned to do in Mayan court manners.

By now, Galeron had been waiting patiently and quietly for much longer than he had expected. He thought he would have been allowed immediate audience. After these long minutes of sitting at the king's feet, he finally began weaving uncomfortably and in anticipation of sharing his important news to the gathering.

Perfectly aware of the aggravated state of his guest, Mehosha purposely skipped over him to the next speaker.

"Now, Sir Knojes, I would be pleased to hear from your side of the story."

After spluttering like a motor boat and swearing like a sailor, Galeron reluctantly regained his quiet manners in spite of his dismayed astonishment.

Ignoring him, Knojes started to elaborate his tale to the eight listeners. "Lady and gentlemen, it is my honor to relate to you this story of mine. In fact, it is even a delight, I should say, to perform this duty for the sake of enlightening you all, especially, but not in exception to, his majesty, King Mehosha. Of the foremost aspects in importance, I shall begin with—"

Loud, exasperated groans from multiple parties in the room prompted Mehosha to implore Knojes to make his telling more concise in nature. "Knojes, please try to keep it brief."

The messenger was hurt and insulted, but he had the grace to comply with the king's request. In a dry, offended air, he spoke:

"I found the Spaniard. We returned. On the way, he met his troupe. He split from the rest of us. I brought his troupe here."

A stunned silence ensued. Mehosha was not amused.

Glowering sternly, he commented, "Since Sir Knojes was kind enough to give us a sparse account, completely lacking any embellishment whatsoever, we can now move on."

Galeron was the only one who seemed pleased with the news.

He beamed beatifically up at Mehosha, who continued. "Now, a very patient person can get a load off his chest. You may speak now, Sanchez." Instantly, Galeron's smile faded completely, replaced by an open-mouthed, silent moan of disappointed disbelief.

The present Spanish soldier had a moment's hesitation, but at last, he bowed to the king and addressed the circle. He was struck by the atmosphere in which the king received his visitors. Cortez insisted that no one interrupt him, and woe to

him who did. He seemed to expect only good news that got even better by the minute.

In contrast, Sanchez felt free in the court of King Mehosha to say what he needed, without the urge to make up lies that sounded good or made anybody look better, including himself.

So, regaining his confidence as a result, the sergeant told his story calmly and truthfully. "By rights, I should be your enemy. I am a low-ranking officer in the army of Commander Hernando Cortez, chartered by royal order from King Ferdinand, over in Spain." Receiving blank looks from all, he explained, "Spain is the land where we come from, over the great water we call the Atlantic Ocean. Ferdinand is the leader of our nation, and he and his queen, Isabella, are responsible for funding this expedition.

"Because that's what this was supposed to be all along. An expedition, not a conquest, not a bloodbath. That's what I signed up for, but now it's gotten out of hand...it's Cortez's fault, for the deaths, for all the life wasted in this land. I'm sorry, though, 'cause it's not really all his fault, and I'm—I've got blood on my own hands," and here Sanchez looked down as if to see the offending stains on his palms. He was starting to pant, and his voice had gotten husky with emotion when he stopped.

Glancing up, he half expected to see the others circling him with vengeful faces glaring at him spitefully.

Instead, they were still in their original positions, and everyone except for Galeron and Sir Knojes had understanding expressions. In a silent request, the king nodded his head once for him to continue.

Sanchez took a deep breath and kept going with his voice back under control. "Sorry about that. And, thanks for, you know, and I guess that's really it. Wait, no it isn't...I haven't told you about the Spaniards yet. Well, all I know is that Cortez is so intensely greedy that he is going to take your civilization just because you have the gold he wants. The only problem is that even if he gets gold from you, he won't believe that it's enough. It's never enough, not until every last ounce of gold in the whole world is his. Maybe even then, he wouldn't be happy.

"His army is barely loyal to him because their only motivation is the same as his, except not on such an obsessive scale. The best thing for you to do in your situation is fight—not just for the sake of fighting, but because if you resist enough, the soldiers in Cortez's army will lose their will to follow him. By the way, you can count on me and my own squad to fight for you."

Mehosha was pleased by Sanchez's courage and advice. "Thank you, Sir Sanchez, for your insight, and your sacrifice as well. You will be rewarded."

For a moment, Sanchez was unable to speak. Then, he objected, "But, your highness, I'm not Sir Sanchez, it's just plain Sanchez. I'm not a conquistador. Only my own king or queen can give me that honor."

"In that case, I, King Mehosha, will give you the title of a knight. Kneel, Sanchez of Spain." Though the Spaniard hesitated, he finally decided to obey.

Recognizing that something was missing, Mehosha exclaimed, "Hold on a minute. Someone get me a spear."

One of the royal guards, at Skutl's attentive urge, handed his spear to Mehosha. At this, Sanchez raised his head uncertainly. "Wait, your majesty—a spear?"

With a snort of disbelief, the king asked, “What’s wrong with a spear? What else would you have me use, your sword? You speak nonsense!”

Embarrassed, Sanchez waited for the impromptu ceremony to finish. Mehosha, after accepting the proffered spear from Texur, continued from where he had paused.

“Sanchez, in the name of the king, I dub you Sir Sanchez of Spain. Rise, Sir Sanchez.”

Instead of tapping the kneeling man’s shoulders three times with a sword, as European kings normally did, Mehosha held his spear above Sanchez’s head for the duration of his introduction until he spoke the words “Sir Sanchez of Spain.” At that point, he thrust the spear into the air in front of Sanchez and dropped the end heavily onto the ground near the man’s foot when he ended.

“Okay, I’m sick ‘n’ tired of waiting...so now can I have a turn?” Though Galeron had not technically interrupted the ritual of Sanchez’s knighting, the king and his guests were still annoyed by the insistent, whining tone that accompanied Galeron’s request.

Hesan spoke up quickly. “Your majesty? I think Galeron should speak before me because he looks like he’s about to explode. I wouldn’t mind. In fact, for my own good, I should probably wait till after he shares.”

“I think you may be right, young Hesan, but it is still important that Galeron learns patience. You may speak now, Galeron. That is, if you have anything to say...”

Galeron exhaled an enormous sigh of derision. He got to his feet as quickly as he could despite his painful injuries.

Then, about to begin, his face suddenly turned blank, as if he had forgotten what he wanted to say after all this time.

But only for a moment. Giving no introduction, he just plowed right through and got straight to the point.

“It’s too bad you morons all waited so long to hear me on this one because I have info. It’s such important info that if only you knew, you would beg me to tell you. But I’m tired of waiting, so I’ll tell you anyway.

“I’m a double agent. Me ‘n’ the other guy, Ulzaq, we work for Cortez. But Ulzaq doesn’t know that I’m actually in a secret plot with a few Spaniards to assassinate Cortez. I helped capture Chief Estevan to put myself in good graces with Ulzaq, ‘cause then Cortez would trust me.

“Cortez’s agent was supposed to meet up with me, Ulzaq, and our captive, the chief here. Since your highness’s niece over there stopped us, the fool probably knew the game was up and hightailed it back to Cortez. I guess that’s why I’m telling you guys about me, ‘cause I’m pretty much in a bloody mess if he gets any reason to suspect me.

“But that’s not the worst part. Ulzaq, once he wakes up, he takes off on a horse—my horse, the blockhead!—and is probably spilling his guts to Cortez as we speak. And ‘cause you all couldn’t let me talk, we’re already running out of time.”

The nine had formed a tight, standing circle, and Mehosha looked around at the faces of each individual. His own face reflected the gravity of the situation that was represented to different degrees in the other people’s expressions. Galeron’s displeasure still registered in front of the urgency of his message, while Knojes

seemed to spurn Galeron even more than he did Sanchez. Estevan and Sanchez shared an almost identical stance of interest while the twins actually presented a mirror image of each other's open mouths and raised eyebrows. When Eilemé noticed Mehosha glance her way, she obliquely motioned towards Hesan.

Hesan, who had so graciously let Galeron speak before him and was now fidgeting uncomfortably, made a small pleading motion with clasped fists and earnest eyes.

Letting a smile ease the tension some, the king allowed Hesan to speak. "Hesan, you're the only one who hasn't had the chance to speak to the group. Do you have anything to share?"

Clearing his throat self-importantly, Hesan joked, "Nope. I forgot." Then, after giving Galeron a friendly grin, he corrected himself. "Actually, I do need to share some information. Sir Pedro, who is the captain I captured earlier this week, is obviously not here as expected. However, this is by my own design...he has earned my trust several times already, even in so little time. Anyway, as Sir Knojes put, we 'split from the rest' of our group. That would be me, Val—well, a jaguar—Sir Pedro, Archer Dovan, and my little brother, Lejo. Now, first I've got some bad news, and then I've got some bad news."

Familiar with his son's quirks, Estevan interjected, "Okay, let's hear the bad news first."

"Certainly, father. We found where the main Spanish camp is." He took a breath to continue speaking. Suddenly, Hesan dropped his eyes guiltily, almost ashamedly.

Estevan just looked sideways at him, and Mehosha asked, "Wait, what's the other bad news?"

Dejected, Hesan couldn't make eye contact with his father. Instead, he addressed the king with his reply. "My little brother was captured by the main Spanish army."

Even though she did not even know Lejo, Eilemé was filled with sympathy. "What? Could you help him? Did you try to rescue him? Is that where the others are?"

Hesan was miserable with the memory of his betrayal.

"I—I couldn't. Didn't. Yeah, I left the others there, because, because I..."

"You couldn't take the responsibility?" Estevan no longer could stay silent. Eyes blazing, he yelled at his son, "Wouldn't go out on a limb for anyone but yourself, huh? Not even for your own brother, your own flesh and blood?"

"Father, wait. I—"

"No, you try and tell me you weren't thinking about yourself! Well? No! Because of you, my son is abandoned to the enemy, and then you want to just forget about him?"

"But, father, it wasn't—"

"Don't you dare try and justify yourself! I won't stand for it! I can't even believe you, Hesan. You're my eldest son, and you expect me to hand off all my hard-earned livings to you after you pull something like this?"

Extreme pain flickered in massive bouts on Hesan's face. Unable to speak anymore, he tried once more to look at his father's face. Estevan turned his eyes away and folded his arms, putting an end to any further discussion.

Scalding, hot tears stung Hesan's face as he begged the chief to reconsider. "Father, please, just listen to me!"

Estevan stoically ignored his son, gazing stonily at a distant tapestry. Blinking away futilely at the saltwater, Hesan could not take being forsaken. Shaking his head, he was quickly overcome by emotion.

He clenched his fists and tightened his mouth until his jaw muscle bulged and a cry started low through his teeth.

As his mouth slowly opened, the desperate growl lifted up to a throaty scream of agony. The room shook with his roar of anguish until at last he whirled around and took off blindly through the door.

Without taking one look at his son's rapidly disappearing form, Estevan turned to the king and said,

"Your highness, I believe you now have all the information necessary to decide what to do for the Maya."

Heaving a huge, tired sigh, Mehosha grimaced. In a weak attempt to lift the oppressively gloomy atmosphere, he rubbed his hands briskly together and confirmed, "Yep. It's all coming together, now."

Eilemé just sighed disgustedly at her uncle. She gave Estevan a quick once-over and then ran out in the direction Hesan went. She called over her shoulder as she left, "Now look what you've done. He's still your son, you know!"

• • • • •

Aguilar studied the horse and rider heading for the sleazy inn. From his vantage point in the corner of the bar, he could watch and wait for his targets. Aguilar thought he had seen the man before, but he was too well trained to make sloppy guesses off memory alone.

Instead, the undercover Spaniard glanced nonchalantly at the hand-drawn portraits in his mantle pocket. Though the images looked plain, Aguilar knew that the artist who had rendered them was extremely adept at his trade and could be trusted to include important details, from facial hair and jewelry down to eye color and cheekbone placement.

After consulting his notes, Aguilar made a judgment call. Actually, this was the second judgment call he had made that day. His orders had been to meet two agents and a high priority captive at a drop-off point early that afternoon. Instead of finding them, however, he had waited for over two hours before finally leaving to avoid picking up attention. His first personal call had been to let the others catch up with him.

Now, he could recognize the rider as one of the two agents. What alarmed him was that not only was the agent empty-handed, but he was also alone as far as Aguilar could tell. Perhaps there had been a miscommunication.

After all, with Cortez's recent loss of leadership ability, such miscommunications happened so often that they were neither unprecedented nor unexpected.

In fact, Cortez made many judgment calls of his own.

Usually, they somehow managed to get him more power at the same time that his inferiors lost theirs. Even the lowest grunts of the army were affected negatively.

Aguilar recalled a day that Cortez had displayed one of the more ingenious of his ideas. After the Spanish legion had landed in the southern shore in the Gulf of Mexico, Cortez had ordered every single ship captain, sailor, marine, and any other person remotely acquainted with running an oceangoing vessel to stay aboard the fleet.

As soon as the last of the main force had set foot on dry ground, Cortez next commanded the artillery batteries to fire upon the entire fleet. Within a few minutes of the flaming deception, every last ship had sunk to the bottom of the Atlantic, ending any hopes of retreating back to Spain in the near future.

Aguilar, disgusted with his leader's treachery and conniving carelessness, cautiously selected an extremely tight circle of men who would help him kill Cortez. Even as the native tribes fell one by one to the Spanish flag, they secretly trickled their way into the plot. That was how Galeron had joined the Renegades.

Galeron and Aguilar had gotten along well—at least, as well as any two distrustful skeptics could. Since Galeron was a native, he had much better access to greater native levels of authority, and so Aguilar had included him in their anti-Loyalist plot.

Now, Aguilar needed to talk to Galeron, but he was not in view. His next judgment call was this: rather than greet the unknown agent or call attention to himself, he would test the rider to see if circumstances had changed.

So, Aguilar sat back in his chair and ignored the rapidly approaching man. Having dismounted, the agent was reeling and holding a hand to his head as if in great pain.

Wearily, the rider rubbed his bleary eyes and searched the bar for someone. Finally, he reached for his coat.

Rifling through the pockets and finding nothing, he plunked onto a seat a few tables down from where Aguilar was guardedly observing the whole scene.

Exasperated, the agent then continued to look halfheartedly for an apparently unfamiliar face. After ordering a drink and downing the whole flask distractedly, he got to his feet and went around the room tapping people's shoulders. His routine consisted of getting their attention and asking them, "Are you waiting for someone?" At last, after nearly all of the occupants of the bar had been eliminated, the agent walked painstakingly over to a very much amused Aguilar.

As if simply the act of talking hurt him considerably, he asked Aguilar, "Sir, are you expecting someone to join you?"

Having no sympathy for the inept agent, Aguilar casually answered the man's question with a question of his own. "I don't know. Should I be?"

Aguilar calmly waited while the man cursed and swore with no indication of slowing down, much less stopping.

However, after about half a minute, the agent changed his vocabulary slightly. "You mangy son of a mutt! For all this darn time, you sat on your dirt-filled rear while I went to just about every single stinking person in this whole filthy pig sty! I really want to kill you."

"Name's Aguilar. Yours?"

"Ulzaq. And I still want to kill you."

"Well, now, we're off to a great start."

"You think I'm joking?"

"I'll admit, it's hard to take you seriously. You look like a building fell on top of you."

Ulzaq skipped a beat in the conversation before retorting, "Yeah? Well, you look like a building fell on your mother during childbirth!"

Aguilar took his faltering as an opportunity to interpret the reaction however he wanted. "Aha, so you did get squashed by a building! Is that why your companion is missing, as is the promised prisoner?"

Put on the defensive, Ulzaq bristled. "You think you know everything, don't you? I could squash your head like a lizard under my boot, and you treat me like an idiot! I should—"

He could not continue talking without cutting open his trachea. Aguilar had whipped out a long dagger and now held the tip against Ulzaq's throat.

Aguilar hissed furiously into Ulzaq's ear, "I'll give you some advice: don't underestimate me. This time, my advice is free. Other people have paid with their lives to learn it. Now, let's go on a little walk, shall we? Turn around, por favor. "

Aguilar motioned with his dirk, and Ulzaq obliged.

Setting the tip of his dirk against the back of the bigger man, Aguilar covered it with his sleeve and marched Ulzaq out the door of the inn. The bartender took one look at the pair and lifted an eyebrow. Aguilar returned the gesture with a sweeping motion across his neck. The bartender decided on the spot that their drinks would be free of charge.

Once outside, Aguilar loosened the tension on the dirk, but Ulzaq knew better than to try and make a move.

He had gambled and lost, so now Aguilar was in control.

The two walked a little farther until Aguilar spied a bench.

Ushering Ulzaq towards it, he had him sit down and explain himself. "You'd better have one heck of a story to pull on me, or Cortez won't have anything left to punish when I'm through with you."

Knowing that he had no choice, Ulzaq let fly. "Today started out just fine. Galeron and I had the prisoner in a sack, and we took off after lunch with him in our wagon."

Remembering his childish fight with Galeron for the reigns of the cart, he skipped ahead to the more important details.

"Well, that foolish donkey Galeron crashed us into a stupid wall, and I don't know anything else that happened until I woke up an hour or so ago. Galeron was standing over me and saying something about Cor—er, some sort of plot being uncovered. I grabbed his horse and went straight here."

For the slightest fraction of a second, Ulzaq's face slipped somehow as he mentioned the plot. Not about to miss an important detail, Aguilar noticed the slip.

Apparently, Galeron had accidentally leaked some intelligence to Ulzaq. Aguilar had no way of knowing for certain how much information Ulzaq knew. Ulzaq might even have figured out that they were Renegades and could pass on the tip to the Loyalists.

He now had two choices: he could either kill Ulzaq and return to Cortez himself or bring him along and use Ulzaq as backup. Even though the second choice was unpleasant, he decided that he would have to go with it as much as he already hated Ulzaq.

Aguilar made sure he didn't let on that Ulzaq's façade had been discovered. Narrowing his eyes slightly, he told Ulzaq, "Fine, then. Let's go back to camp and I'll let you tell Cortez what you told me. That should satisfy him."

Ulzaq got up gently from the bench and made a show of stretching his sore muscles. Then he tried to grab Aguilar's knife from him. Caught off guard, Aguilar was barely able to hold on to the dirk in time.

As a result of the sudden return of his hold on the handle, the edges of the blade sliced pitilessly out of Ulzaq's two-handed grip. The scenario reverted back, and Aguilar stood off to the side with the knife against Ulzaq's neck, in control again. Ulzaq's palms bled as he screamed bloody murder.

Aware that the clamorous profanities could attract unwanted attention, Aguilar prodded his back and silenced the racket. "One more sound out of you, and I'll sharpen my blade between your ribs."

Ulzaq quieted down, but he turned his head back for just a second. If looks could kill, Aguilar would have toppled to the ground, dead about twenty times over. He conceded to himself that even though Ulzaq seemed incompetent, he would need to keep a careful eye on him while they journeyed back to Cortez.

Chapter XII

A Bullet in the Night.

An awful din echoed throughout the prison room as the guard staggered around holding his hands to his head.

He shouted in a strangled voice, "Argghhh!! You stupid kid, you're going to drive me crazy! Would you please just stop?"

Grinning innocently, Lejo consented. "Okay, sure! What is it you want me to stop, again?"

The guard gingerly peeled back his sweaty fingers away from his ears. When the noise failed to resume, he hesitantly asked, "Hello? Are you still there?"

Lejo supplied, "Duh, stupid. You've got the keys."

There was no answer.

Realizing that the guard had gone practically deaf, Lejo crowed exultantly, "Yippee! You can't hear me! You can't hear me!"

No sooner had he begun shouting, then another guard rushed into the prison tent with an urgent message.

"Carlos! Carlos? Hey, the boss can't stand the prisoner. He says either we stop it or he lops it. That means you, man! Listen, can you even hear me? Hello? It's me, André!"

André saw that Carlos only gave him a blank, uncomprehending look, so he turned around to go. Before he could leave, though, a barrage of sound assaulted him from behind.

Lejo had made up a short song. The shanty-like rhyme had popped into his head bit by bit until he compiled it and added a simple melody. The resulting

melodic masterpiece was easy to repeat accurately, was one of those songs that could never get out of one's head, and was astonishingly and unapologetically annoying!

The rather tasteless tune rippled from Lejo's cage mercilessly and soon had Carlos writhing on the ground.

Old Cortez, who lived in a hole
Under a knoll and inside of a bowl,
Met a mole with a lump of coal
And then found out that he had no soul
Poor Cortez who had such a bellow,
'Twas not mellow, but rather yellow
Don't say hello unless the smell o'
His awful breath won't make you a pillow
Oh, Cortez, you have no more luck
Than a hunting duck who swims in the muck
Or a guy who's stuck with a drowning buck
When you pass by, everyone says "Yuck!"

At last, André could tolerate the singing no longer.

"*Ay caramba!* Will you ever shut up?!" He looked over to Carlos, who was by now lying in the fetal position, and opened the door to Lejo's cell. "I'm gonna give you a lesson, you little brat! This oughtta teach you not to drive us guards out of our minds..."

Lejo backed away to the wall of the cage and gripped his sprained wrist helplessly. The guard chuckled menacingly and stepped forward. Recoiling before the blow, Lejo bit his lip to keep from yelping as André backhanded him brutally. Another strike sent Lejo spinning to the ground. The boy pretended to be knocked out and closed his eyes to get the guard to turn his back.

André nodded, satisfied, and headed for the open door. Taking a chance, Lejo silently got to his feet and quickly padded over to the unsuspecting guard's unprotected back. With a feathery touch, Lejo attached something deadly to André. Then he stumbled and fell to make him think he had awoken but was still too dizzy to walk.

Happy to finally leave, the guard closed and locked the door. "You stay quiet now, hear? I don't want to have to come by again, trust me."

Lejo muttered, "Me, too."

Luckily, the half-deafened guard paid no more heed to Lejo's comment than he did to the paper glued to the back of his armor. When the guard was out of earshot, Lejo made no attempt to smother his laughter.

Later, during inspection, Cortez saw the note on André's back. With cold ire that spelled immediate doom for whoever it was directed at, he demanded, "What do you mean to accomplish by displaying such a statement for all the camp to see? Or are you just suicidal by nature?"

André was too frightened to object, but as Cortez drew a sword and ordered him to kneel, he asked hopelessly, "What are you talking about?" When someone

handed him the note, André stared blinking and horrified at what the message read:

‘Cortez is a big, smelly fathead.’

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All it took for them to see the Spanish camp a few miles away was a quick glance over their shoulders. And a closer look revealed the guards crawling over the camp grounds. But Pedro chose to think of them only as an added challenge. He glanced over at Valeria, who was watching him and Dovan busily plan the next attempt to rescue Lejo.

Knowing that the last time almost got themselves captured and that this would not help Lejo, Pedro and Dovan proceeded to brainstorm more clever ideas that included what to do once they returned to the cage, rather than simply turning to run back to safety.

Before long, all was prepared for the operation. The three were beginning the trek to the Spanish camp under cover of darkness.

Relative darkness, that is. The sun was low in the sky, and dusk was almost ready to cover the world with the shadowy feel that gradually chokes light from the twilight air. The soldiers guarding the edge of the camp were in the middle of swapping shifts.

Dovan chose that moment to step into their midst. He took advantage of their momentary confusion to pose a burning question. “Hey, what’s that over there?” Out of the eight total guards, comprised of the first four and the second four, only one looked to where Dovan was pointing. That was all Dovan had counted on, and was all that he needed.

He tucked and rolled neatly forward, popping up right in front of the distracted guard. A fast thrust to the diaphragm stole his breath and his gun away. Dovan held onto that for future use.

Moving quickly now, he brought the stock of the gun down hard onto the head of the closest guard. Pressing onward to the next few soldiers, he alternated between kicking and punching to keep them at bay before finishing with a whirling spin, holding the barrel of the gun out at chin height. Guards went flying.

Now Pedro entered the scene. He deftly scooped a small handful of gunpowder into a cloth pouch filled with flour and pockets of air.

After taking a second to light a corner on fire, he threw it at the remaining soldiers. The pouch landed in the sand at their feet and exploded. The flour ignited simultaneously, and the compressed air blew the burning substance into the air, making a very effective smoke screen.

Dovan whispered urgently to Valeria, who had materialized at his side, “Go find Lejo! Val, go find him!”

Again somehow understanding what was required of her, Valeria melted away into the cloud of smoke, leaving Pedro and Dovan to deal with keeping up the diversion.

The alarm had spread through the camp, and the two would-be-rescuers now had their hands full with reinforcements pouring from tents everywhere. Dovan nodded to Pedro, who gave him a wink. The Spaniard shouldered the stolen gun and took expert aim. A shot rang through the air.

The bullet flew straight to its target and ricocheted inside the stable. Horses went wild with panic and stampeded crazily throughout the camp. Dovan gave Pedro a high five.

Pandemonium ensued. Somehow, a fire started in one of the tents, and the majority of the soldiers ran to put it out. Horses continued to run amok, knocking buckets over and making problems worse.

Meanwhile, Pedro and Dovan joined Valeria, who led them shortly to the prison hut where Lejo was waiting.

Discovering that the cage was locked, Dovan asked him, "Lejo, who has the key?"

Grimly, Lejo explained, "No one does. After the, um, singing incident, they had it melted down to keep me prisoner here forever!"

"What singing incident?"

"It doesn't matter. But what does matter is that unless you can break me out of here, I'm stuck inside!"

"I doubt this gun will do it. Wait, here's a battle axe. I hope nobody bothers to check in on the prisoners during this mess."

As if on cue, a guard poked in his head. He managed to let out a loud shriek before Valeria dispatched him.

Pedro knew they had no time left before their whereabouts would be discovered. Putting down the small stockpile of weapons he had gathered, he picked up the axe. In desperation, he cried out, "Lejo, get back!"

Mustering all of his strength, he swung the hammer against the cage. Wooden bars splintered under the blow, and two swings later, the cage walls were essentially nonexistent. As if someone had to say it, Dovan urged them, "Hurry, let's get out of here!"

Just then, a squad of armed Spanish soldiers ran to the entrance of the hut. Lejo grabbed a pair of double-barreled blunderbusses and pointed them at the guards. With a war cry that would put a banshee to shame, he pulled the four triggers, one after another, sending a storm of lead into the squad.

Lejo went flying backwards from the kickback. The guards returned the volley with their own weapons. Gun smoke and bullets were thick in the air, and soon nobody could see anything farther than the tip of his nose.

Somewhere in the chaos, Pedro let out a pained groan, and Dovan groped blindly towards the sound until he reached his friend, lying in the dirt and clutching his side.

Though Dovan's voice could barely be heard above the din, he shouted, "Lejo, Valeria, where are you? Pedro's been shot!"

Despite the confusion and total disorder, Dovan kept his cool and dragged Pedro clear of the hut into the open air, now dark with night. He was able to pick out Valeria headed his way, limping slightly. But there was no sign of Lejo.

Dovan called out for him into the burning night, straining to hear a reply among the loud ruckus. Leaving Pedro on the ground in a hidden corner, he reentered the prison hut in hopes of finding Lejo. Inside, he stumbled upon several bodies of Spanish guards, but there was not a Mayan to be found.

Dovan was torn in his failure to find Lejo. The whole plan was indeed dissolving in front of his eyes, and unless he evacuated Pedro and himself immediately, both

of them would be caught and most likely killed, which would be a definite inconvenience for Lejo. Trusting that Lejo would be able to find either him or Valeria and make his way to their campsite, Dovan decided to take care of Pedro first.

He caught hold of the reins of a passing horse and managed to get Pedro into the saddle. Hopping up behind him, Dovan dug his heels into the flanks of their steed, and they galloped away from the awful commotion.

Only when they had left the camp far behind did Dovan slow the horse to a canter. There was almost no chance of finding their small stash of supplies among the dim landscape, but a quick search led to its discovery.

Dovan dismounted and carefully lowered Pedro to the ground. Other than uttering a faint moan, the injured fellow did not stir.

Dovan wrapped Pedro in a blanket and built a fire to keep him warm and to light the way for Lejo and Valeria.

He waited patiently the entire night in hopes that they would stumble into the firelight and be welcomed back to the party.

In the morning, he woke with a start and stood quickly. Dovan looked around the site but found no one else but Pedro, who was shivering violently in his sleep.

Dovan cursed softly, realizing that he had given his friend no medical attention so far. He felt Pedro's forehead which burned his fingers at the touch.

Finding some cool water in a spring nearby, Dovan brought a leather skin back and forth a few times, getting water to ease Pedro's fever.

Next, he examined the wound. Even if he had worn the standard conquistador's armor, Pedro would not have fared much better at such close range. The rounded ball had penetrated the front of Pedro's stomach just above the kidney and had shattered a rib in the process. Dovan couldn't find the second hole that would represent the shell's exit, so he had to assume that it was still lodged in his abdomen.

Then he searched the plants and roots in the undergrowth for a medicinal herb with which he could make a poultice. Locating one, he boiled it in a helmet of water before soaking a torn-off piece of cloth in the solution. He cleaned the angry, yellow-black gash and then applied slight pressure with a rope.

Left with nothing else to do, Dovan had no choice but to finally come to grips with his situation. After leading a rescue attempt, he had not only failed to save Lejo but had also lost Valeria and gotten Pedro injured. Dovan yelled in grief, his lamentations echoing in the desolate, unforgiving forest.

Over the next two days, he had only one objective: to preserve the last, remaining person for whom he was responsible. And so Dovan tended for Pedro constantly, replacing spent bandages with fresh ones, trickling water down his parched throat, and trying to feed him sustenance that he could digest.

Once, Dovan endeavored to surgically remove the shot from Pedro's side. He took a knife carefully to the spot and scissored a section of skin away. Unfortunately, he could not see any shiny, telltale sign of a bullet or a fragment of one. So he closed up the patch of skin and let it be, trusting that someone soon could give professional aid to Pedro.

Because Cortez demanded that the Spaniards continue their march, Dovan had to be continually on the move, staying one step ahead of their army. This only

aggravated Pedro's condition and thoroughly exhausted Dovan. *No way can I keep this up for long*, he thought. *My only chance is that the Mayans find us.*

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Minutes later, Hesan's feet were still pounding along the palace passageways. Eilemé, who was already tired from her earlier run, was starting to fall behind. But then he reached a dead end in the hall and stopped at last, breathing heavily.

Eilemé was not sure if Hesan knew that she was there or not, so she spoke up faintly. "Hesan?"

He did not respond, but rather lowered his head and swiped his sleeve across his nose. He remained with his back to her.

She asked again, "Are you all right?" even though anyone could tell that he was deeply troubled.

Without facing her, Hesan muttered hoarsely, "Go away."

Eilemé took a few steps forward and lifted her hand up hesitantly.

Hesan sniffled and said brusquely, "I said go away."

Taking another step slowly, Eilemé touched his shoulder delicately. He bristled but stayed put. She swallowed, sighed, and started to say something.

Hesan interrupted her. "Thanks for trying to be nice and all, especially since I just met you, but right now I want to be by myself."

"Why?" she said simply.

Hesan shuddered as though the question was too painful to contemplate. Then he explained, "You saw it. My dad disowned me—in front of the king!"

She insisted, "Of course not. Your father still loves you, Hesan. You and he just had a little misunderstanding, that's all."

"A little misunderstanding? He blamed me for my brother's capture, and he practically said I wasn't worthy of being his son!"

Quietly, Eilemé pointed out, "It's not about worthiness. No one can earn the privilege of being a son or daughter. It has to do with family. You're not a Kirtech because you do good things, not because your name is Hesan, and not even because you were born to Estevan and his wife."

She took a breath before continuing. "It's because there are people around you who care about whether you live or die, who want to be with you, and who forgive you when you have a bad day. They're there to help you, to back you up. Now, I want you to go back inside the room and apologize to your father."

"What?! But he's the one who—"

"I know, but this always works better. Do you think your father would be the first one to humble himself to you?"

"Definitely not."

"So then if you don't start, you two would hate each other forever?"

"Yeah, right. We would make up someday."

"Oh, would you? If there weren't any outside influence, you might never speak to him again. So come on, let's go." She tugged at his shoulder to no avail.

Hesan didn't budge. "My dad hurt me. A lot. He deserves to feel guilty for a while. After he stewes for a while, maybe then I'll ask forgiveness."

Eilemé realized that her tactics were not working like she thought they would. She changed her approach and tried to exhort Hesan. "Look, you're going to feel

guilty about this if you mess up. Don't make a choice you'll regret for the rest of y—"

"I don't care. Just leave me alone." Hesan jerked his shoulder away from her hand.

Now Eilemé began to get impatient with him.

"C'mon, you'll have to fix this someday or another. We're all going to count on you to bring us to that Spanish guy so we can figure out a way to solve our problems with Cortez."

He whirled on her angrily and snapped, "What did I just say?" And before she knew it, she was at the brunt of his full ire for the second time that day, and it didn't dissipate in a couple seconds, either. Hesan raised his voice and demanded, "Give a man some peace and quiet!"

But Eilemé had a comeback ready for him. Blinking furiously, she responded, "You? A man? Ha! I've seen more mature boys in the nursery. No, you aren't a man. You're just a big kid who flees responsibility. Life has been thrust at you, and instead of accepting your part in this world, you still are trying to hide from it."

He complained bitterly, "Who asked me if I wanted this part? Nobody! Everyone assumes that I should stop everything in my life and embrace my destiny. Why me? There are a million other Mayans who could have been chosen. I don't want it anymore."

She could almost see the fumes rising from Hesan's head, but she went for the mortal blow. "I can understand why your father would want to disown you." That last part was excessively out of line, Eilemé realized immediately, but it was already too late. As soon as the words left her mouth, they formed a stinging barb that flew towards Hesan. In the following instant, they pierced his heart and brought him to his knees, literally.

So there he was, broken and battered and beaten. As though all the emotion in him had been drained, leaving an empty shell, Hesan could only kneel on the cold, hard stone. His face was blank for a few more seconds, before he crumpled to the floor.

Eilemé wished she could take back what she had said.

She stood staring at the young man. For that's what he was, a child learning to be an adult, just as she was. And so, unexpectedly, she found herself torn because, however much she thought he needed to grow up, she also knew that he needed her support. What happened next surprised them both.

She hugged him.

"And move it! Let's go, go, go, go, go!" Commander Sanchez sometimes seemed to enjoy his new position too much.

But at least he's enthusiastic, Hesan thought. *You've got to give him that.* And indeed, the Spaniard's habit of appearing everywhere at once, first out in front of the line and then back in the rear flanks, was a tribute to his high-spirited energy. Mehosha's choice to promote him had been a no-brainer.

Mehosha had also made a very gutsy call, however.

Forging an alliance with Cortez was unfeasible, but the idea of going to fight him had been unfeasible, too—until the Renegades had showed up to level the odds.

Even with their gunpowder weapons and iron armor, however, the prospect of a pitched battle with the Loyalist army looked rather grim for the Mayans.

Hesan marched alongside the Spanish-Mayan column, scanning the contraptions that the Spaniards had. He still did not wish to participate in the fighting, but he could not overcome his curiosity for the foreign weaponry around him.

After obtaining permission to do so, he examined an infantryman's *harquebus*. Though he had been told how it worked—by an explosion propelling metal through the air—he was extremely skeptical as to its effectiveness on the battlefield. So, he asked the soldier to give him a brief demonstration of the gun's power.

Blithe-faced, the man nonchalantly pointed out a mango tree about twenty-five yards away from the jungle trail. Without a word, he poured a small handful of powder into the magazine pan located at the front of the handle.

Then he packed a half-dozen or so shot pieces of cast lead down the long iron barrel.

The soldier brought the gun to his shoulder and planted his feet. Sighting down the barrel really did no use in reality because of the relative inaccuracy of the arrangement, but for show he aimed at the previously indicated fruit tree. A slow burning match on a wheel was inserted into the firing chamber, and it quickly ignited the gunpowder.

Hesan was unprepared for the noise of the explosion, and he instinctively ducked his head with his hands clamped over his ears. As a result, he did not see the actual firing of the bullets, but he could see the effect.

The mango tree's leaves were flapping down from the branches and the fruit itself was falling off in bunches. The echo of the concussion was reverberating through the rain forest, and the sound of panicked birds taking flight could be heard after the explosion faded.

With a grunt of indifference, the infantryman rejoined his column, leaving the curious Mayan boy wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Finally, Hesan blinked and looked around at the marching army, and he met the eyes of one of the men driving the cannon wagon. Wordlessly, he stared at the gigantic weapon, its five-inch-wide caliber, and the enormous balls that went into it.

The driver pointed at the cannon, verifying Hesan's unspoken request, and turned to his superior, who was lounging in the back of the cart. Interrupting the driver before he could say anything, the officer ordered firmly,

"No."

Both Hesan and the driver whined for a little while until the column had moved on past him. Yet Hesan stood still and waited. The first, second, third, and fourth groups of Mayan soldiers passed him. He eyed the eagle warriors with their spears, the jaguar warriors with their macanas, and the archers...Hesan thought of Dovan, and sighed gloomily.

He shouldered Haeldar and finally started to speed-walk towards the front of the line. Just then, he heard his father's voice call to him. He stood, riveted to the spot, debating whether or not he could pretend that he had never heard it in the first, but then Estevan called again and had obviously seen Hesan.

Hesan didn't really intend to heed Eilemé's words, but he had to face his father at any rate. Slowly he made his way towards the rank in the army where his father was waving at him and fell into step with the soldiers.

He let his non-verbal communication speak for itself.

Though not frowning, Hesan made no effort to smile or appear pleasant. Eye contact was not established, nor was it asked for. After a period of silence, Hesan got comfortable with not having to make any step towards reconciliation and decided that he would let his father make the first move.

Estevan interrupted his reverie. "Hesan."

Instantly, all of Hesan's resentment rose to his immediate consciousness. It was accompanied by a small, smug realization that Eilemé had been wrong about them never speaking again.

With Estevan's next few words, Hesan steeled his resolve. "Hesan, I've been thinking about what we said to each other back in the palace."

Estevan might have expected him to say something, but Hesan remained silent. Clearing his throat, Estevan continued. "Back there, I did not speak to you like a father should speak to his son. I let all of my anxiety and impatience out on you, and not only was it unfair, it was also untrue. I love you, Hesan."

Struck speechless, his son kept marching. Hesan didn't know how to respond. He had been so sure that his dad would want him to beg for his forgiveness. He had been so ready to hold onto his pride forever, or at least until later.

Now, he was unsettled and his resolve melted. Hesan took a deep breath and gathered his courage.

Then they both heard the sound of galloping hooves.

• • • • •

Commander Sanchez glanced at the pair of out-of-place men in the ranks of Mayans. After a few seconds, he realized that they were the two Kirtech chaps, Chief Estevan and that dragon-tamer kid, Hesan. He refrained from saying anything to them and urged his horse farther along the column.

The jungle was quickly thinning, and the head of the army had already reached the edge of the forest. Under his horse's hooves, the grassy trail choked with weeds and undergrowth turned into muddy dust and finally sandy dirt.

As he drew near to his own squadron again, he addressed the infantry with a question. "Hey, *muchachas*, how come I heard a gunshot from over in this direction?"

One of the men, who had been studiously cleaning his harquebus, stumbled slightly in his gait before catching himself.

Rather than confront him head-on, Sanchez referenced a cannon sergeant with his next question. "Do you know what that was all about, señor?"

Leaning against the back of the cart, the officer shook his head knowingly. "Yeah, but you really don't want to know."

Sanchez was about to beg difference, but then a scouting party hailed him.

"Sir! We came across a strange Mayan with a weird creature. He claims to know where our old capitán is."

"You mean tu Madre? How is he?"

"I don't know, sir. The Mayan is still here, but we didn't think you would—"

Disgusted, Sanchez interrupted, “I would what? That I would...never mind. Just tell me, where is this fellow?”

The scout pointed towards the front of the line, where Sanchez could just make out the Mayan. With a quick lash of the reins, he headed toward the figure, whom he recognized from the incident in the ravine, and the creature, which he also recognized from the same place.

The Mayan was bending over, obviously fatigued, and looked to be on the verge of collapse from exhaustion.

Sanchez dismounted and introduced himself. “¡Hola! My name is Sanchez, but you will address me as—”

“Whatever. Mine’s Dovan. To make a very long story very short, Pedro’s wounded, and I need to talk with Estevan and Hesan of the Kirtech clan.”

Sanchez was not the kind of person who thinks first and reacts later. He replied without too long of a pause, “Well, then. Where is tu Madre?”

Dovan pointed at the creature.

“What? He’s inside that—that thing?” Sanchez asked, appalled. The creature growled at him, and he involuntarily stepped backward.

Dovan swayed and caught himself. “No. Follow her.”

He promptly keeled over.

Sanchez pointed at one of the scouts. “You, bring this man to Chief Estevan, or his son, Hesan.”

Then he gestured at the others. “You all, follow me.”

Less enthusiastically, he then waved to the creature.

“You there, uh, I’m—that is, we are all going to follow you to tu Madre, er, that is, Sir Pedro. *Comprende?* The guy with the—oh, never mind.” Realizing how ridiculous it must seem for him to talk to an animal, Sanchez shut up.

After giving Sanchez a long, hard stare, the creature trotted off in a direction that he could only assume led to Pedro.

• • • • •

Hesan was so used to hearing Sanchez galloping to and fro that he did not bother looking until the noise was right on top of them. What he saw then was almost beyond conception. The horse rider was carrying the body of a familiar archer from his village.

Hesan yelled at the rider to come closer, and he helped to unload the precious cargo, who was just reviving.

“Dovan! Are you all right?”

Dovan groaned and shook his head weakly.

“What can we do to help you?” Hesan asked anxiously.

“Nothing. They’re gone—all gone!”

Perplexed, Estevan inquired, “What? Who’s gone?”

Hesan was horrified. “No! Not gone. They can’t be!

All of them? Dead? Please, say it’s not so! Tell me it isn’t so!”

Dovan only said, “I’m the only one left.”

Estevan, with an awful dawning of comprehension, demanded, “Dovan, what happened to Lejo? Where is my son?”

Dovan moaned, “I don’t know.”

Hesan interjected, "Wait, if you don't know where he is, how do you know he's dead?"

"I didn't say he was dead. I said he was gone!"

"And Pedro? Valeria?"

"She's leading Sanchez to where Pedro lies."

"Buried?"

"No, wounded."

All three stopped talking. Incredulous, Hesan concluded, "Dovan, you didn't have to say they were all gone! You could have just told us why they weren't here."

Estevan hushed him. "Hesan, he must have been through a lot these last few days. Give him some slack."

"No, my lord, your son is right," Dovan conceded. "I feel terrible. About losing them, I mean. Well, I do feel pretty tired right now, too."

By now, the entire army had passed by them except for a lone wagon. Weighed down by Woab's bulk, the royal coach was slowly lagging behind the main force. In actuality, there was not much about the four-wheeled, open cart that could be called royal. At the moment, Mehosha was walking alongside the pair of horses, encouraging them to put on a show of effort to catch the rest of the army.

Estevan called, "Your highness! Do you have any more room in that wagon of yours? We've got another horse!"

Perking up, the king answered forcefully, "Of course! There's always room in the—well, actually, with Woab inside it, not really. But come inside anyway! That giant little brother of mine could always use some walking exercise. And the horse would be a welcome addition to our end of the caravan here."

The scout almost started to protest the conscription of his horse but wisely stayed quiet. Woab hopped out and assisted the king with yoking the scout's horse to the wagon tongue. Hesan and Estevan gently helped Dovan step into the wagon. Hesan found a soft-looking cloth bundle, thought it would do well as a pillow for Dovan, and reached for it.

Right then, Woab had glanced back at them, and when he saw Hesan go for the bundle, he yelled and waved his burly arms. "Wait! Stop! Uh, that's my, my...um...dirty clothes bag. Yeah, so don't be touching that."

Hesan protested. "But it would be in much better use as a pillow for Dovan—"

"No! I mean, maybe, but I personally don't want you ... touching ... it..."

Ignoring him, Hesan grabbed it anyway. "Nonsense, Woab," he started to say, but then the bundle rolled away from his grasp. "Huh?" he finished.

Again, he reached for the bundle. Again, it moved.

This time, a hand poked out of its depths and slapped him soundly upside the head.

"Ouch! What the—"

"How dare you, creep!" shrieked a voice from inside it.

Infuriated, Hesan was ready to start grappling with the unknown stowaway, but then the voice's owner popped out her head.

"Get away from—oh. Hi! How are you?" she asked innocently.

Hesan froze with his hands and arms in front of him, ready to tackle something, but soon lowered them to his sides. Still bewildered, he stammered, "Eilemé? Why—er, what are you doing here?" He absentmindedly rubbed the lower part of

his cheek, where a blotchy red mark had resulted from the slap Eilemé had accidentally given him.

“Oh, does your face hurt?” she asked, suddenly concerned.

“Naw, you didn’t hit me that hard. It probably sounded like it hurt, but it didn’t. Don’t worry about it. I would’ve done the same thing. Well, I guess not the exact same thing, but you get the picture.”

Estevan had to interrupt. “I think I missed something here. Eilemé, why in the world are you hiding in a bundle on the royal cart going to battle?”

Eilemé looked at Woab, so he answered for her. “This wasn’t my idea, remember? You practically begged me to allow you to come with us. Oh, well. It’s my fault for letting you hitch a ride. I honestly don’t recall what I was thinking at that point.”

Estevan concurred. “Nothing, probably. I’m sure King Mehosha would agree that this was a foolish decision. Eilemé, I don’t know why you wanted to come with the army, but now that it’s already happened, we’ll have to make the best of it. I’m sure we can find some safe location for you to wait out the battle without getting into any more danger.”

The next to speak was actually Dovan. He whispered hoarsely, “King Mehosha? What do you have to say about this matter?”

About to turn his head and answer, Mehosha was distracted by a Renegade messenger from the front of the column. “Sire! Commander Sanchez would inform you that the Loyalist army is in sight, and our soldiers are forming battle lines at this very moment.”

Drawing up as imperious an air as a little man pulling at a cart could, Mehosha replied, “Very good. Tell the commander that his presence is requested at the council meeting this evening.”

“Yes, sire.”

As the man reared his horse and headed it back to the front lines, Woab muttered, “Council meeting this evening? What council?”

• • • • •

Woab, Mehosha, and Sanchez—along with Estevan, Dovan, Eilemé, Hesan, and Valeria—all gathered around a campfire that evening right after dinnertime. Nearby, Pedro slept fitfully on a cot, tended by royal doctors.

Hesan was constantly hovering over the cot and constantly being shooed away by the nurse.

Mehosha lifted his palms high, and all eyes flicked to him. “Attention, everyone. This royal council meeting will now come to order. Our Chief Royal Aide to the—”

Woab raised a hand and said, “King, you’re not kidding anyone. Just get to the bottom of this, could you please?”

After a few moments’ pause, the king complied.

“Right. So then, the first order of business is obviously taking care of tomorrow’s battle. The floor is opened to Sanchez.”

The Renegade commander stood and addressed the circle. “Gracias, your majesty. Anyway, the big deal here with fighting the Loyalists is that they far outmatch us.

Despite superior numbers, we have no real advantage, but it is possible that they have yet to discover the existence of our Renegade army or that they doubt the significance of it.

“To push this advantage, our best course of action would be to hold back any appearance of Spanish handiwork somehow. The only problem is, to do so will mean that until the Renegades engage the Loyalists, there won’t be anything standing between their gunpowder weapons and the Mayan flesh.

“So the trouble I’m having is coming up with a way to protect the Mayan army with something that bullets and cannonballs won’t penetrate. Quite honestly, I haven’t thought of a way to counteract their firepower first off. Does anyone have any suggestions? Oh, and I now do hereby open the floor and whatnot.”

Eilemé raised her hand and Sanchez acknowledged her. „Si? What is it?”

“I know something that bullets and cannonballs can’t penetrate. The ground!”

Sanchez could not help but respond sardonically, “Really? And how does that help us? We can’t make earthen shields for the troops.” The others nodded.

But Eilemé was not finished yet. “No, we can’t make shields for each individual soldier, but we could make a giant shield for them all!”

Struck by the apparent absurdity of her statement, Sanchez dismissed it somewhat scornfully. “That’s making the problem with your first idea about a thousand times worse.”

Then, Hesan deciphered what she was thinking. “Wait, Eilemé doesn’t mean like a shield you hold—she means dig a tunnel that we could use to fight from the inside.”

Silence reigned for a moment as the adults digested the two youths’ words. Mehosha was the first to recognize the unfortunate impracticality that the proposal entailed.

“Impossible. Even if a tunnel would help, it would still take at least a week to dig it all.”

Sanchez added, “And a tunnel can’t provide any way to attack the Loyalists unless we lured them inside of it along with us.”

The mood turned somber, and the council went silent once more. Valeria growled quietly and started pawing at the dirt. Hesan and the others sullenly gazed at the action.

A few seconds later, Valeria had stopped her digging and there was now a sizable trough in the ground.

Watching her, Hesan had an inspiration. Jumping up, he cried out, “Look, Val, you did it again—she’s a genius! Don’t you all see? If we dig out a man-made trench, then the Mayan warriors could wait for the Loyalists to reach the edge of it and then ambush them. And the Loyalists wouldn’t be able to see us inside it.”

The others, though skeptical, listened with rising hope as his confidence grew. “Even if they did, we could see them, too. And we would be able to shoot our arrows at them even as they shoot their guns at us. At that range, our inferior power would be more than made up by sheer numbers! If everyone started digging tonight, we could have a trench big enough for several ranks to crouch behind by daylight.”

Excitement surged through them all as each person realized the truth in his words. Finally, Sanchez slowly got to his feet. Awe shone in his eyes as he murmured, "It just might work. Hesan, you just made up one heck of a plan!"

The king, who was the one who needed to be persuaded of the strategy, clapped his hands together roguishly. "Bravo, young man! That's just the kind of scheme that we needed. With this overgrown ditch, we can buy time for the Renegades to flank the Loyalist army and turn the tables on them. Now, everybody, prepare for some serious ditch-digging!"

Woab held up a hand. "Wait, my king. It's imperative that we keep all of these goings-on very secret. If the enemy learns of this plan, then it's back to square one again. So, we'll need to wait until cover of darkness to hide our activity. The worst thing that could happen is them catching on to what we're doing."

Calming down some, Mehosha admitted, "True. Woab, I'm leaving you in charge of the trench project. Sanchez, take the plans a couple steps further and try to out-think the enemy. And everyone else, disperse."

Hesan immediately rushed over to Pedro, who was still resting. "Hang on," he urged. "By the time you wake up, the battle will already be over."

"You know he can't hear you," Eilemé confided conspiratorially.

Startled, Hesan whirled around and faced her, putting his back to Pedro's cot protectively. "Hmm? Hear what?"

Eilemé giggled. "Come on, Hesan. You're not fooling anyone. Sir Pedro's asleep, and you were talking to him. Let him be alone. He needs his rest."

Hesan stepped away from the cot and sat by the fire again. Estevan joined them and took Hesan by the shoulders. With an enormous grin, he announced, "Son, I am more proud than any father could ever be right now. It'll be an honor for me to fight by your side tomorrow."

Hearing the last of his father's words, Hesan hung his head and started to walk away.

Estevan was mystified. "Hesan, what's wrong? Isn't that what any eldest son would want to hear?"

Saddened and disappointed, Hesan just mumbled over his shoulder, "Not this eldest son." He walked off into the distance to be alone for a while.

Estevan could not understand why Hesan was let down. "What did he say?"

"Something like 'not me.' I guess you said something he didn't want to hear," Eilemé suggested.

"I just don't get it. I try to be a good father, and he just pushes me away." Estevan complained.

"Actually, it might have less to do with you and more to do with him. You should talk with him," recommended Eilemé.

"What? No, you talk to him."

"Fine," Eilemé huffed. Under her breath, she uttered, "Like son, like father." Once again, she took off after Hesan to remedy the father-son relationship.

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Hesan had gone a long way out and was so close to the Loyalist camp that Eilemé almost decided to turn back rather than confront him. He was on a hillock, reclining on one elbow, and plucking at a lone plant in the rocky soil.

When he heard her approach, Hesan rolled onto his back and clasped his hands behind his head, closing his eyes. Once she was within easy hearing distance, he commented without looking, “You’d better sit down, Eilemé. The Loyalists can see you, and a soldier with good aim might try to shoot you.”

Eilemé hurriedly dropped to her knees and sat cross-legged a few feet away from him. She whispered heatedly, “Why are you so close to the enemy camp?! You know the danger you’re in, so what are you doing?”

Detached from the present, Hesan said nothing for a moment. After a long pause, he finally replied, “I suppose I’m here to get closer to my decision. You called me irresponsible earlier, and that’s mostly true. But at the same time, I feel like fighting is such an awful way to solve a problem—if it solves the problem at all.”

Eilemé sighed, “You’re right about that part. If I could do anything in this world, I’d stop all fighting, everywhere. But the thing is, there would still be evil, and choosing not to fight it is like agreeing with it. I mean, if we don’t do anything to stop evil, then who will?”

Sitting up, Hesan countered, “Yeah, but how does that make fighting good?”

“It doesn’t. Fighting is bad, but not as bad as the evil you fight against,” she answered.

“So I have to pick the lesser of two evils, then. Isn’t there an alternative?” Hesan insisted.

Eilemé corrected him. “The question isn’t whether there are alternatives, but whether you need alternatives. If you refuse to fight, then yes, there is an alternative. But what if your choice is already between the right and the wrong choice? Would you be able to see that if you always looked for another option?”

“No, I probably wouldn’t.” admitted Hesan.

“And years from now, when your children ask why you chose not to fight for your people, your friends, and your family, what could you tell them?” she inquired rhetorically.

Hesan thought for a minute. He stared at the dirt beneath him. He saw in Eilemé’s eyes a contagious spirit of valor. Then he stood, tall and proud. With fervent conviction, he spoke bravely, “You’re right, Eilemé. It would be selfish of me to hold my life as more important than the lives of those who will fight tomorrow. I choose—”

A bullet in the night clipped the side of his head. The impact knocked him over, and he rolled down the hillock. The gun’s retort echoed in the dark sky, coming from the Loyalist soldier’s lucky shot. Hesan could not hear Eilemé’s terrified scream as she raced over to him. His eyes closed, and a swirling, radiant vortex replaced the darkness of night.

